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basis | introduction

TRIGGER WARNING
this story entails darker themes such as detailed violence, graphic deaths, mental abuse, physical abuse, mental illness and other topics which may be upsetting for some readers

temporary notice: grim hollow is completely finished!! but it is currently under rivision (no plot changes/anything substantial, so you can still read!). i am just going through and fixing inconsistencies, improving some dialogue/writing, making some minor appearance changes (which will be corrected as I'm editing each chapter. the current allegiance chapter is the correct and updated character designs!), and so fourth. I will continually update here which chapters have been edited.
currently: prologue + 10/36 chapters have been revised and finished (chronological order)

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A/N
hello. i'm lex! you don't have to read this, but it is a bit of insight into the beginning process of how this story came about.
i made this account to mainly read other's work and write for my own enjoyment. i never publish anything and strictly write for fun. one day i started drafting these characters and forming a plot and i was quite engaged with it, so i decided to write actual chapters.

i then made a timeline and once i looked over it, i decided to pursue my first ever published fanfic.

i really enjoy morally ambiguous characters and complex stories. everything i love in fictional media i channeled into this story!

i'm extremely excited for this project and seeing it through, and i hope you guys stick around for the roller coaster of emotions which follow. criticism is okay, we all make mistakes, and i always hope to improve! any and all feedback is appreciated.

little side note since i see it get brought up a few times: this story is a fanfiction of warriors by erin hunter and this concept is fully credited to those authors. that being said, i did a bit of my own world building in which names, culture, etc. will differ from the original series. these are new clans with new characters and new lore. an example of this (and the one i often see brought up) is my characters knowing the standard season names such as fall, winter and so on. in this story, my characters are aware of those terms while also knowing the erin-coined terms such as leaf-fall, leaf-bare, etc.
just wanted to clear that up!

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A/N
from the future

this is lex from the future, nearly 6 years later since finishing this story. just wanted to pop in for new readers or retuning readers with a message from an older, more experienced me.

i was quite young when i wrote this, and while i definitely think i have grown significantly as a writer and storyteller, i still feel so much for grim hollow and i'll forever be glad it exists. the absolute joy i would feel logging on to see the comments dissecting something i wrote and people's passion for characters i created and love so deeply means the absolute world to me. i cannot thank everyone enough or truly express my gratitude. you are all the reason i kept on. thank you. thank you. thank you.

okay, if you're still here, i'll stop rambling haha. if you enjoy this story, i have other fics which all take place in the same universe as grim hollow, just following different characters (or the same, who knows!). hope you stick around! <3

playlist

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SOUNDTRACK

i. *exile,* taylor swift ft. bon iver // **ii.** *money power glory,* lana del rey // **iii.** *flawless,* the neighborhood // **iv.** *mr. sandman,* syml // **v.** *gold rush,* taylor swift // **vi.** *little lion man,* mumford & sons // **vii.** *daddy issues,* the neighborhood // **viii.** *friends,* chase atlantic // **ix.** *xo,* eden // **x.** *retrograde,* james blake // **xi.** *champagne problems,* taylor swift // **xii.** *tolerate it,* taylor swift // **xiv.** *i'll be good,* jaymes young // **xv.** *couple of kids,* maggie lindemann // **xvi.** *fucked my way up to the top,* lana del rey // **xvii.** *you're somebody else,* flora cash // **xviii.** *messages from her,* sabrina claudio // **xix.** *atlas,* coldplay // **xx.** *flicker,* lorde // **xxi.** *salvation,* gabrielle aplin

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allegiances

FallClan

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LEADER
Sunstar
light ginger tom with copper eyes.

DEPUTY
Tigertaunt
dark gray bengal tomcat with blue eyes.

MEDICINE CAT
Graypetal
gray tomcat with yellow eyes.

WARRIORS
Flowerbee
white and gray she-cat with green eyes.
Frozenlily
white she-cat with blue eyes and gray ears.
Frostbird
white she-cat with blue eyes and gray ears. twin to frozenlily.
Duskfur
light brown tom with amber eyes.
Spottedbee
orange tabby tomcat with green eyes.
Meadowlark
calico she-cat with dark blue eyes.
Silverpool
light gray she-cat with amber eyes.
Hawkhowl
dark brown tabby tomcat with green eyes.
Goldenfell
ginger tomcat with golden eyes.
Lakelily

white tomcat with black markings and blue eyes.

QUEENS

Swanflutter

light gray she-cat with soft green eyes. mother to brinekit and dawnkit.

Cypressfall

dilute calico she-cat with blue eyes. mother to dovekit, tealkit and blossomkit.

Southlight

cream-colored tabby she-cat with yellow eyes. mother to leopardkit, nightkit and lionkit.

KITS

Tealkit

black tomcat with green eyes.

Blossomkit

black she-cat with a white chest, underbelly and paws. she has blue eyes.

Dovekit

dilute calico she-cat with green eyes.

Brinekit

light gray bengal tomcat with blue eyes.

Dawnkit

white she-cat with blue eyes.

Leopardkit

cream-colored tabby she-cat with golden eyes.

Nightkit

dark brown tabby tomcat with dark yellow eyes.

Lionkit

golden brown tabby tomcat with yellow eyes.

ELDERS

Creekwillow

gray she-cat with white markings and dark green eyes.

Sagefrost

white tomcat with ginger splotches and green eyes.

SpringClan

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LEADER

Ivystar

light brown she-cat with white markings and green eyes.

DEPUTY

Yellowbird

ginger tomcat with green eyes.

MEDICINE CAT

Mudflower

cream-colored she-cat with a white underbelly and light green eyes.

MEDICINE CAT APPRENTICE

Rootpaw

dark gray tabby tomcat with dark blue eyes.

WARRIORS

Flurryfall ⚞ *apprentice, Bluepaw*

white she-cat with black freckles. she has one blue eye and one green eye.

Snowstep ⚞ *apprentice, Cicadapaw*

black tomcat with white paws and amber eyes.

Creamlily ⚞ *apprentice, Brindlepaw*

whitish-gray tabby she-cat with pale blue eyes.

Falconfoot

brown she-cat with amber eyes.

Harvestleaf

light brown tabby tomcat with white paws and green eyes.

Havenglow

calico she-cat with blue eyes.

APPRENTICES

Bluepaw

slender gray she-cat with deep blue eyes.

Brindlepaw

calico she-cat with brown eyes.

Cicadapaw

ginger tomcat with blue eyes.

WinterClan

□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□

LEADER
Viperstar
dark brown bengal tomcat with amber eyes.

DEPUTY
Clearmist
tortoiseshell she-cat with green eyes.

MEDICINE CAT
Sandsong
pale beige she-cat with brown eyes.

MEDICINE CAT APPRENTICE
Fablepaw
russet tomcat with green eyes.

SummerClan

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LEADER
Fallowstar
white tomcat with gray markings and blue eyes.

DEPUTY
Fireflare
deep orange and white tomcat with green eyes.

MEDICINE CAT
Silentfeather
whitish-gray tabby she-cat with green eyes.

MEDICINE CAT APPRENTICE
Darkpaw
black she-cat with a white mask and green eyes.

OTHER

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Luca
cream tomcat with green eyes.

prologue

Tigertaunt was one of FallClan's most respected members whom was viewed as the epitome of strength and courage. It was these traits which gifted him the rank of deputy, and these traits which promised him the future of FallClan.

However Tigertaunt held not only himself to such high standards, but anyone and everyone who added to his image. His reputation meant *everything* to him, and anyone who could possibly taint his status was seen as an ultimate threat.

Today was no different as the ornate bengal was settled by his pregnant mate; Swanflutter.

She was a prized possession, just another token of status. Nothing more and nothing less and nothing far from perfect. Swanflutter was destined to act as an accessory and to breed upon his perfect fairytale, but the she-cat could not be any more blinded by her love to notice or much less care. To her, evil simply didn't exist. To her, darker motives didn't exist.

To Swanflatter, *everyone* could be justified.

That's how everyone knew her.

The day couldn't be any closer to perfect, either. It all worked in his favor, and Tigertaunt could only relish on how everything fell together like a puzzle only the fortunate could solve.

Early morning sunlight and beautiful birdsong greeted the newborns. The eldest was a tom-kit with fur as silver as starlight and the tiniest bengal stripes, a reflection of his father. Beside him was a bundle which appeared a touch smaller with fur as white and pure as snow.

"Tigertaunt," whispered a gentle voice as she beamed down at her newborn kits, "they're absolutely beautiful."

"I'd expect no less." Spoke a more impassive voice. Being the deputy of FallClan was practically promised to him since his early days. He was driven by ambition and to him, the world was selfish, and to succeed, you must adapt to that unfortunate fact.

"Brinekit for the boy." He quickly spoke, deep blue gaze rested solely on his son. He showed not a single emotion. Not a single ounce of compassion for the kits which lay by his paws, though whatever curiosity he had towards his children was channeled fully on his son.

"A beautiful name. He looks like you, my love." Swanflutter hummed. If she noticed the lack of emotion from her mate, she surely didn't react to it. Instead, she let her sage gaze fall to the smaller of the two.

"She looks like my mother," Swanflutter murmured, pausing momentarily as she was engulfed by nostalgia, "we'll name her Dawnkit."

"Your mother was nothing less than a legend, she will be no different. For Brinekit, he will follow in my paw-steps. No son of mine will be any less." Tigertaunt spoke, an unwavering chill to his tone, though Swanflutter only dismissed his words with a single flick of her ear. For whatever reason, the pale she-cat had fallen for the tomcat, and for whatever reason, she still loved him despite his difficult exterior. The two could not be any different from each other, yet somehow they worked.

However now she could not be any less interested in her mate as she gazed down at her kits, a feeling of warmth seemingly drowning her. Today was a day to celebrate.

Yet despite their family's seemingly perfect genesis, luxury would not greet the two kits. Safe now, but the harsh reality will prove that nothing is ever as it seems.

chapter 1

It was a rising sun, and with that, the rise of a new day. A day full of possibilities and renewed hope. Swanflutter often spoke of the luxury which came along with their existence and how every life, no matter how big or small, had a soul and how every soul was precious. Everything was a cycle. It was a delicate balance between life and death, between prey and predator, between black and white.

It was all mesmerizing to Dawnkit to hear her mother speak such words. She was the wisest cat she'd ever met, however that list was fairly limited.

She often found her mother's lessons lurking in the deepest parts of her mind, relating them to moments in her everyday life. She loved her mother more than anything. She wanted to be just like her; wise beyond her years, beautiful, gentle, compassionate.

She only knew good. It was so intense with her mother. It was as if her energy was contagious, and Dawnkit never knew what it was like to be afraid when in her mother's care. It was a feeling which brought her comfort, and a feeling she wasn't sure she could live without.

Brinekit was different. He was the golden boy, and he held all of her father's attention. However she didn't mind. Tigertaunt was scary, Swanflutter wasn't.

"What are you thinking about?" Murmured the voice she had grown to love. Dawnkit smiled faintly as her thoughts were disturbed by her mother.

"A lot of things mama. My mind seems to never find a single thing to focus on." She hummed as she leaned against the soft gray fur her mother adorned.

"I understand; just means you have a creative mind. Be proud of it,

Dawnkit. It is a blessing." Swanflutter lulled in return, warm green eyes flickering to meet those of a crystalline blue.

"I will. Gives me at least something over Brinekit."

"You know it isn't a competition."

"But it is!" Dawnkit retorted, her little tail wrapping around her paws.

"You and Brinekit have your weaknesses but you also have your strengths, and that is what makes you both so special in your own ways. You want to know something?"

As Swanflutter spoke, Dawnkit only shrugged, however she awaited for her mother's response with hidden curiosity.

"In a world like we live in, we're taught to be selfish, to want for our own desires. We grow to think that we can only be happy when we are at the top, and those cats will hurt whoever they can in the process. Making life a competition never ends well, and being at the top does not guarantee happiness. In fact, I believe it strips you of it." Each word was spoken so delicately, however Dawnkit couldn't help but question the words which left her mother's mouth.

"I don't understand. When I get what I want, it makes me happy. When I'm better than the others at moss-ball or tag, it makes me happy. How can being at the top take happiness away when it feels so good?"

Swanflutter only sighed as she briefly glanced at Brinekit who was sparring with the other kits before continuing.

"Yes, those small victories make us feel good, but that need for more can get out of control, and it's much easier to spiral than you could ever realize, my love. Not all are as blessed as you. You mustn't take it for granted." Swanflutter explained.

Dawnkit was quiet for a moment before she nodded solemnly to her mother and fell into a soft purr.

"I won't mama."

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"Oh look, the misfit has arrived." Snickered the voice of Dovekit.

"And what does that mean?" Dawnkit hissed.

"It's simple, really. Brinekit is the golden boy, which puts you in second place," Dovekit paused, her green eyes falling into slits, "according to your father, second place is losing."

"Oh shut it Dovekit, if you're insecure just say it. Jealousy isn't very pretty." Spoke another voice, that of Leopardkit. She was Dawnkit's best friend.

"I can't possibly imagine what there is to be jealous of, but whatever helps you sleep at night." The calico kitten retorted.

"The girls are *always* fussing." Nightkit rolled his eyes.

"Yeah. Blossomkit, can you tell your sister to shut her trap for once in her life?" Lionkit sighed.

"I'd like to keep my tongue." Blossomkit shot back.

"You know Dovekit, you have such big talk to be the smallest one here." Brinekit pointed out, gaze narrowing on her.

"You won't be saying that when I become leader one day and you'll all have to answer to me." The calico hissed, though Brinekit just looked at her for a few silent moments before giving her a chuckle.

"Whatever you say."

"Can we play a game already?" Nightkit broke their quarrels and Lionkit nodded his head in agreement.

"Like what?" Leopardkit queried from beside Dawnkit.

"Moss-ball?" Tealkit suggested.

"Boring." Dovekit remarked.

"Tag?" Lionkit then added.
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"That game is for the younger kits." Dovekit rolled her eyes.

"Hide and seek maybe?" Blossomkit then suggested after a small silence.

"Absolutely not." Dovekit retorted quickly.

"Then how about *you* give us an idea?" Leopardkit hissed.

"Yeah, since it's all about you, *all the time."* Dawnkit added, clearly annoyed. Ever since they first met, Dovekit had been insufferable. She was quite literally born with an attitude she was sure would repel even their most feared predator, and for no reason at all. Dawnkit couldn't recall a time where she had wronged the calico, but she seemed hellbent on insulting her at every given chance.

"It is. Thank you for noticing." Dovekit agreed smugly.

"If you have an idea, just spit it out already." Brinekit rolled his eyes from where he sat beside Tealkit, clearly getting bored with her antics.

"We sneak out."

"What?" Lionkit questioned almost immediately, clearly not too keen on the proposal.

"You heard me." Dovekit shrugged.

"Do you want us to get in huge trouble?" Blossomkit challenged her sister. She was always boring. Dawnkit often wondered if the black kitten had any sense of humor at all.

"Not if we're smart about it."

"You really think our mothers won't notice eight missing kittens? Come on Dovekit, use your brain for once." Tealkit spoke, eliciting a small chuckle from Brinekit.

"So what we get caught? We just pull the curious kit card. The worst thing that could happen is we're, I don't know, grounded? Not like we have much freedom to begin with." The calico reasoned, her

eyes wide and full of mischief.

"She has a point." Brinekit added, getting a satisfied nod from Dovekit.

"I guess." Nightkit shrugged.

"I'm in if you are." Leopardkit whispered into Dawnkit's ear who nodded.

"We'll go." She murmured.

"Great. How about the rest of you?" Dovekit queried.

Blossomkit and Tealkit shared an uncertain glance before finally nodding in reluctance.

"Great. Lionkit, that leaves you. So what is it," Dovekit paused as her eyes fell to slits, "are you going to come, or stay behind like the buzzkill you are?"

"I'll go," he sighed, "someone has to watch over you idiots."

"Great!" Dovekit purred.

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"Wow, the world is so-"

"Big!" Leopardkit interrupted Blossomkit as the eight kittens took in their new surroundings.

"Guys, look! It's a mouse." Brinekit squeaked.

"I bet I can catch it." Dovekit claimed.

"I'd like to see you try." Leopardkit quickly responded with a smug grin, challenging her.

"Yeah. Go ahead Dovekit, seeing you fail would make this whole outing worth it." Dawnkit mused, which was enough to motivate the calico just as she expected it would.
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"Fine." She huffed, falling into a crouch. The other seven followed suit.

Dovekit was sloppy in her movements, though she was so light that it didn't really make a difference. The mouse seemed completely distracted by the seed it was nibbling on anyway. It was completely oblivious to the world around it.

Dawnkit watched her intently, analyzing every movement she made, making tiny critiques in her head.

Finally, the calico jumped off her hindquarters and to her utter luck, caught the mouse between her paws. To say Dawnkit was impressed was an understatement, even if the catch was messy.

"No way!" Nightkit squealed.

"Kill it! Kill it!" Brinekit chanted, Leopardkit and Tealkit adding into the chant with excitement radiating off of them.

Dawnkit didn't share their excitement. Instead, she was filled with something much more negative. She couldn't necessarily pinpoint what it was that she was feeling, but it enraged her to see Dovekit catch the mouse.

"Not bad, Dovekit." Lionkit grinned. Even Blossomkit seemed interested, and *everything* bored her.

"What were you saying, Dawnkit? Seeing me fail would...?" Dovekit taunted, and all Dawnkit could imagine was clawing the smug look right off her face.

"It was just luck. I will say I'm glad you caught it, not sure your fragile ego could handle the failure." Dawnkit snickered back which earned a condescending laugh from her brother, though she wasn't sure if it was aimed at her or her calico rival.

"Right. Leo, what was it you said?" Dovekit hummed as she faced Leopardkit, who tilted her head in confusion.

"Oh," she smirked as she looked back to Dawnkit, "I remember; jealousy isn't very pretty."

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Hello!! The first few chapters will mainly be showing you the different dynamics between characters, as well as meeting the core characters! The plot will start moving along very soon. :)

Also, to make it clear if it wasn't:
- Brinekit and Dawnkit are siblings
- Blossomkit, Tealkit and Dovekit are siblings
- Lionkit, Leopardkit and Nightkit are siblings

That's all! I hope you enjoyed this chapter. Feedback is greatly appreciated. ＜3

chapter 2

"Are you nervous?"

Dawnkit lifted her head as the voice of her brother traveled into her ears.

"About?" She queried, however she knew what he was implying. In the next few sunrises, their apprentice ceremony would take place. She was excited, however anxious, but she assumed anybody would feel the same.

"A little, maybe." She sighed, resting her head on her pale paws as Brinekit softly padded towards her.

"We'll be sharing a den with Dovepaw, Tealpaw and Blossompaw again." He teased gently, resulting in Dawnkit rolling her eyes as she nudged her brother.

"Don't remind me." She mused.

Dovepaw and her siblings were apprenticed days ago and it was nice to finally be away from her and her excessive babbling. Dawnkit wasn't sure if there could be anyone more annoying than the calico. However it would be a little while before Leopardkit, Lionkit and Nightkit joined them, which she found upsetting. She made sure to promise Leo that she'd have a nest built right beside her own for when she did become an apprentice as well.

Dawnkit was also terrified of leaving the safety of the nursery, and more importantly, the safety of her mother. She would have responsibilities now, and she could no longer snuggle into the warmth of her mother's fur when she had a nightmare, though her wandering thoughts and worries were interrupted by Brinekit.

"I swear you're always thinking about something."

"Mom says that's a good thing. Keeps your mind active. I'll be

smarter because of it."

"You cling onto every little thing she says still?" He questioned, however it made Dawnkit grow defensive.

"Of course. She's the smartest cat I know."

"No. You're just gullible."

"You really think mom would lie to us?" Dawnkit hissed.

"That's not what I said, don't put words in my mouth. It's just," he paused for a moment, "you take *everything* she says too literally."

"When it's all you have, you would too. I'm sorry I don't have the instant respect from father like you do."

Speak of the actual devil.

Tigertaunt.

"Hello father." Both of the kittens spoke in unison.

Her father's gaze flickered from Dawnkit to Brinekit. She could feel her stomach churning.

"The two of you will be apprenticed soon and I've talked with Sunstar to ensure you're both apprenticed to the strongest warriors. Only the best for my two children." His words were bleak. Her father was the deputy, so he and the leader were very close. Tigertaunt almost always got his way with Sunstar. Sometimes she forgot Sunstar was even the leader, half of the time her father appeared to have the upper paw.

"Thanks father. I won't let you down." Brinekit reassured, his gaze flickering between the two of them momentarily.

"I know you won't."

Those words unraveled nothing but annoyance in Dawnkit. Her brother was a kit, what if *she* was the golden one all along? What was it about her brother that earned instant admiration?

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"Brinekit, you have reached the age of six moons and it is time for you to be apprenticed. From this day on, until you receive your warrior name, you will be known as Brinepaw, and I have the pleasure of announcing that I will carry out your training," Sunstar paused as he smiled down at a beaming Brinepaw, "I will pass down all that I know to you."

As the two touched noses, Dawnkit felt her heart absolutely shatter. How could she compete with her brother now? His mentor was the leader for StarClan's sake! She tried to recite her mother's words, how love defied success, but it still hurt. Besides, she was great at multitasking. She could love and hate her brother at the same time.

"Dawnkit." As her name fell from Sunstar's mouth, her frustration instantly vanished, and so did her nerves. All she wanted was to be a warrior, and now her training would officially begin.

"Now Dawnkit, me and your father have talked about a different course for you."

Dawnkit tilted her head in confusion as her eyes met an equally confused Brinepaw's, however she didn't speak.

"Dawnkit, you have reached the age of six moons and it is time for you to be apprenticed. From this day on, until you receive your name, you will be known as Dawnpaw." He didn't say warrior name; to say she was freaking out was an understatement.

"Your mentor will be Graypetal. I know this isn't what you expected, but I believe you will thrive. He'll pass down all he knows to you and we both believe you'll be a wonderful medicine cat one day."

Dawnpaw seemed completely frozen in place and all she could do was look at the approaching medicine cat with pure horror as he touched noses with her.

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"Daddy must have lacked so much confidence in you that he had to

make sure you couldn't tarnish his name by becoming a warrior. How sad."

Dovepaw.

"I'm not doing this with you." Dawnpaw only hissed in return, however she had to bite her tongue as a smirk crossed the calico's features.

"On the bright side D, at least you'll be in the upper ranks, makes up for the boring life you'll live as the rest of us have actual meaning."

"Are you done?"

"While the rest of us get to train together, grow together, you'll be left alone. Sorting herbs."

"Shut up!" Dawnpaw had tried keeping herself calm, but all Dovepaw's words did were ring true to her. She *would* live a boring life. She *would* grow up alone, while her friends stayed together.

It wasn't fair.

~~~

"I can't believe it."

"Yeah, I can't either." Dawnpaw sighed.

"It doesn't make sense. They've never seen you do anything to hint you'd be interested in medicine much less good at being a medicine cat. What was your dad and Sunstar thinking?" Leopardkit questioned, her golden eyes round as she stared at her friend.

"I honestly don't know, Leo. Maybe I wasn't as good as Brinepaw, but I didn't lack potential. At least," Dawnpaw paused with bitter distaste, "I didn't think I did."

"Yeah. You could've definitely been the *second* best warrior in the clan!" Leopardkit mused lightly, but Dawnpaw only batted an eye.

"Behind me, of course." Leopardkit added.
~~~

"Right, you've got big talk to still be a kit." Dawnpaw reminded, the two laughing for a brief moment before continuing their conversation.

"Maybe it won't be so bad." The tabby suggested quietly, offering her friend a hopeful glance but Dawnpaw just shook her head.

"You know," she paused, "Dovepaw came to see me after my ceremony."

"Oh Dawnpaw, you know you can't take what she says to heart." Her friend spoke, however Dawnpaw continued on.

"I know. I usually don't. But listen Leo," Dawnpaw looked at her friend, "everything she said was true. I'll spend most of my days sorting herbs, finding herbs, herbs this and herbs that." She paused, tearing her gaze away from her friend as she looked ahead longingly.

"I can't think of anything worse."

chapter 3

"Feverfew."

"No, we've been over this. That's chickweed."

Dawnpaw wasn't sure she could roll her eyes any farther than she was now. Graypetal really expected her to know all the herbs in a few days?

"They look exactly the same." The medicine cat apprentice groaned.

"But they're not. Look," Graypetal pointed, "this is feverfew. The yellow bud is much larger, while chickweed has longer, more flared petals."

"Got it." Dawnpaw muttered, however she wasn't even listening. She couldn't care less.

"Okay, then what's this?" Graypetal spoke as he nudged a yellow flower towards her with thick green stems.

"I have no idea. Marigold?"

"For StarClan's sake, no! It's coltsfoot, a basic level herb."

"Not my fault they're all yellow." Dawnpaw mused, though Graypetal didn't find her joke very funny.

"Well when a cat comes in with a cough and you treat them with marigold, tell me how it feels to be labeled the worst medicine cat in history." He grumbled, but Dawnpaw just gave him a confused look.

"I thought marigold healed coughs?"

"No, they help with infection." He sighed in defeat.

"Oh." She murmured, stifling a laugh as he gave her a death glare.

"Just get out of my sight, we'll go over this all tomorrow. Brush up on your facts by morning. It'll be a small test."

"Got it!" She grinned, nearly skipping out of the den. She seemed to suffocate whenever she was around her mentor who seemed to lack any kind of substance *besides* teaching. Did he even have a sense of humor?

"Hey D!"

Dawnpaw twisted around to meet golden eyes, a smile slipping across her jaws.

"Hey, Leo." She said as she faced her friend who had just recently had her apprentice ceremony. Though ever since, all Leopardpaw would talk about was her training and Dawnpaw couldn't help but grow annoyed. She was just listening to what she couldn't have, and it irked her more than anything.

"I'm heading out with the other apprentices, want to come?" The tabby queried, however Dawnpaw wasn't sure she wanted to. She couldn't relate to them like she used to, and she envied them. Worst of all, she envied Leopardpaw. It wasn't fair that they all got to go out and practice strategic battle moves or be outside the camp. But that was life for you; unfair.

"I guess." She finally shrugged.

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"Flowerbee is nice, and I heard she's the best hunter in the clan." Dovepaw boasted, however Brinepaw scoffed from beside her.

"Flowerbee doesn't even amount to *my* mentor. I got Sunstar, try beating that."

"Oh shut it Brinepaw, you only got Sunstar because your dad is the deputy. It's privilege." Dovepaw hissed.

"And truthfully, no one cares about your mentor's hierarchy." Blossompaw spoke, causing Lionpaw to chuckle lightly beside her.
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"I agree. We all know I'll be the best warrior either way." Leopardpaw purred.

"What about you Dawnpaw? How's your mentor?" Dovepaw asked, and Dawnpaw could feel the condescending nature of her question.

"He's great." Probably the biggest lie she's ever told. "He's wise and heavily respected by the clan, I mean, he is the medicine cat."

"Yeah. He's pretty brilliant." Leopardpaw added, offering her friend assistance.

"Right." Dovepaw murmured, though she didn't push the matter any further. Dawnpaw would kill to know what she was thinking.

The eight apprentices continued to chatter, some grouping off to stay with their closer friends as they padded through FallClan's terrain. It was a silent agreement amongst the assembled cats to head off to Clearfalls, a small waterfall on the edge of the mountain which fell into the Silverrun River in the gorge below.

Eventually they made it, and Dawnpaw wasn't sure she'd ever get tired of the view. Besides, her mother always told her to appreciate the world they were so lucky to live in.

"Guys look!" Nightpaw called out, looking back. "It's a badger!"

"What?" Lionpaw panicked.

"Oh chill out, it's dead." Dovepaw snapped as she joined the others.

"Leopardpaw, what are you doing?" Blossompaw skeptically asked.

"Poking it." She grinned sheepishly, pawing at the corpse. "It's definitely dead."

"What if there are others?" Lionpaw asked, his eyes rounded with worry.

"It's stiff; probably been dead a couple of days. If there were others," Blossompaw paused as she looked at them with a small smile, "they're long gone now."

"Okay," Dovepaw interrupted, "I'm bored. Let's play truth or dare."

"Truth or dare? Really?" Blossompaw groaned.

"Yes really." She hissed in return.

"I'm intrigued." Dawnpaw spoke up, causing the others to lift their heads before exchanging brief glances. "Who starts?"

"I will." Brinepaw volunteered, blue eyes settling within deep gold. "Leo, truth or dare?"

Leopardpaw remained stiff for a few moments, her gaze narrowing on the silver bengal before a small smirk crossed her jaws. "Dare."

This seemed to be exactly what Brinepaw wanted, and if Dawnpaw didn't know any better, she would've guessed the two had some sort of silent agreement.

"Right," he paused, "since you believe you're so high and mighty, I dare you to a spar. *With me*." He challenged, the others looking amongst each other with excited glances before focusing on Leopardpaw.

Dawnpaw analyzed her friend, hoping she'd decline the offer. Leopardpaw's ego was fragile, and based solely on her father's words, Brinepaw seemed to be gifted at combat. However they had only been apprentices for a short while— Leopardpaw especially— so she wasn't entirely sure. Though a small part of her was curious, so instead of speaking up to talk her friend down, she remained quiet.

Leopardpaw didn't hesitate; Dawnpaw noticed that her friend still seemed quite sure she'd win. *Oh Leo, you're about to get the humbling of a lifetime.*

"Your funeral." Leopardpaw challenged, her tail lashing behind her slowly.

"Wait." Lionpaw stood up, the others redirecting their stares to him. "We should have rules."

"Buzzkill." Dovepaw hummed in a somewhat melody.

"No, he's right." Blossompaw spoke up. "No unsheathed claws. The first to hold the other down for three seconds will win."

"We've been apprentices for what, half a moon, and you both think you're some elite, highly strategized warriors now?" Nightpaw mused, a timid Tealpaw laughing gently beside him.

"I don't think. I *know."* Leopardpaw corrected, however Nightpaw disregarded her with a single flick of his ear.

"Enough talking, you're wasting time." Dawnpaw snapped, tail curling around her paws. "Let's begin." She grinned, Dovepaw smirking in turn.

This would definitely be interesting; her brother against her best friend.

Leopardpaw and Brinepaw began circling each other, each with heads hung low, the others spread apart to give the two space. Brinepaw would flicker an ear every here and there, but Leopardpaw never flinched. Dawnpaw watched intently, making mental notes in her head, studying their body language. She assumed Leopardpaw would make the first move, and she was right.

Her friend paused abruptly, golden eyes falling into slits as she flung herself towards Brinepaw, however he dodged the attack. Leopardpaw was quick to twist around, ensuring he wouldn't plan a move on her failed attempt. It reminded Dawnpaw of how they'd spar as kits, however their moves seemed a little more calculated now.

This time, Brinepaw leapt back in, though at last second he switched courses, causing Leopardpaw to twist around to him hurling into her side. The two rolled on the ground, each struggling for the upper paw.

Dawnpaw noticed they weren't strategizing at all. It was all chaos-stricken and haphazard, a literal ball of fur and ego. To be quite honest, she found it entertaining. Hadn't father always told her and

Brinepaw to fight with composure? She could almost hear Tigertaunt's criticism.

"Who are your bets on?" Nightpaw whispered into her ear, and she glanced at him briefly before back to the ball of fur in front of her.

"Father has been spitting out critiques ever since we were born. Besides, Brinepaw's had more training, and father said he's a gifted fighter."

"How could your dad know that so early into his training?" This time it came from Blossompaw, a skeptical gleam in her eyes, but Dawnpaw only shrugged. She didn't have an answer for her.

Her focus was interrupted as Brinepaw had Leopardpaw beneath him, her eyes ablaze from below. *How predictable.*

However, as the third second approached, Leopardpaw sent her hindquarters barreling into the soft part of Brinepaw's stomach, sending him breathlessly to the ground. The tabby she-cat didn't hesitate as she quickly hurled herself to him, digging her paws into his back. For a few fleeting moments he struggled, trying to regain control, but three seconds came and went, forcing him to surrender.

"And Leopardpaw wins!" Dovepaw squealed, but Dawnpaw wasn't feeling entertained anymore. *How would father react to a younger apprentice beating his golden son?*

While the thought of Brinepaw being scolded was unnerving, a part of her relished in the idea of it, but that part of her that relished coincided with a guilt she couldn't deny. So instead she tucked those feelings away.

"Gifted, right?" Tealpaw spoke quietly, only for her ears. She met his eyes, expecting to see judgement, but it was unreadable. She held his gaze momentarily before tearing it away to find an eager Leopardpaw beside her.

"Did you see? I won!"

"Congratulations." She purred, nudging her friend's shoulder.

"I mean, it's not like I'm shocked. I knew I'd win." She reminded.

The apprentices spent the rest of the evening playing out their game, but Dawnpaw noticed her brother wasn't nearly as cheerful as he had been, leaving her to wonder how truthful Tigertaunt had been about him and his supposed gift.

chapter 4

Midnight came quickly, but despite the lengthy journey home from Clearfalls, Dawnpaw wasn't tired. Far from it actually; her mind was all over the place.

She found herself perched upon one of the jutting rocks located in her camp which overlooked everything. She liked being able to watch her clan, sometimes she'd even memorize their typical routines. She'd focus on how they'd interact with each other, subconsciously taking notes in her head. Watching how they'd react to certain things was something she deemed useful, a way to help her mold herself to fit their personalities. Matching energies she assumed, or something along the spiritual mojo she'd hear Graypetal talk about.

The apprentice wasn't left to think for long as she was approached by her father, resulting in her instantly fixing her posture, her eyes not meeting his once.

"You have a test tomorrow and you've been out all day. Why aren't you sleeping?"

"I work fine off no sleep, father. I'll do good tomorrow, I promise."

"Graypetal tells me you've learned absolutely *nothing."*

Dawnpaw felt her heartbeat quicken, though she forced herself to stay composed as she finally met his narrowed gaze.

"I was off today. I'll do better tomorrow."

"I don't want your excuses." The bengal scolded, and she swore if he pinned his ears back any further, they'd reach his skull. "I specifically asked Sunstar to assign you to Graypetal so you get an instant invite to the high ranks. No child of mine will make a fool of me, especially one gifted with such a respectable role so young. This is a privilege, Dawnpaw, start treating it as such."

She wasn't a failure. It wasn't *her* fault she was apprenticed to a rank she knew she had zero interest in. Dawnpaw's fear vanished with his words, burning away with a rising anger.

"Well then I suppose you'll have two failures in the family." She hissed, eyes slanted. "Because Brinepaw got his tail handed to him today."

"Come again?"

"He and Leopardpaw sparred. You know Leopardpaw?" It was word vomit but it just kept coming. "Yeah. The *newest* apprentice beat your golden son."

Now came the guilt. What was she doing? Half of her was scared Tigertaunt would punish her for the outburst, while the other part of her worried for Brinepaw. It was just one stupid spar. It wasn't that big of a deal. Well, outside of her family it wouldn't be a big deal. Unfortunately, her father would never grant the courtesy of grace.

"Really." Tigertaunt spoke, however it wasn't a question and his voice was completely apathetic. She opened her mouth to speak in a desperate attempt to lessen the potential consequences of her mistake, but no words came out.

She didn't have anything to say.

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Morning came quicker than she would've wanted and all she had was the pesky melody of birdsong to remind her that Graypetal was going to quiz her over herbs that day. No matter how many times she tried to convince herself the knowledge would come naturally to her, she knew deep down it wouldn't.

The white she-cat left the medicine cat den only to be greeted by a pair of green eyes she loathed all too well.

Dovepaw.

"I'm busy. What do you want?" She spoke, mimicking the apathy her
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father usually spoke with as she shoved past the calico.

"Have you seen Brinepaw today?"

Dawnpaw paused for a few painfully long seconds before she slowly turned to face her, eyes rounding in confusion. Dovepaw's tone held solicitude and that worried her. It wasn't like her to be caring.

"Why?" She questioned, almost demanded, anxiously reading the calico before her. Of course it was an act. The concerned expression which laced Dovepaw's face slowly turned into a more malicious one.

"Your dad wasn't too happy to hear about his defeat."

"What are you talking about?" Dawnpaw asked, though she wasn't dumb. *She knew.*

"You know what I'm talking about."

"So what?" Dawnpaw hissed. "It was a stupid spar. It's not that big of a deal."

Dovepaw tilted her head, and Dawnpaw wanted nothing more than to strangle the other apprentice as a feigned look of concern crossed her face.

"I don't think Tigertaunt saw it that way. I mean, just ask Brinepaw. He had to pay the price."

Dawnpaw's heart instantly sank. What was she talking about?

"What do you mean?" She asked nervously, ears pinned. "Where's my brother?"

"Oh Dawnpaw." The calico paused, inhaling as she let her expression harden. "You didn't waste a single second to get into daddy's good graces. Didn't even take you a day to rat out your own brother."

"Excuse me?"

"You can deny my claims all you want, but we both know your actions were out of malice. Just a desperate attempt to amount to your perfect brother and hurt him in the process. It really is pathetic," the calico paused once more, "*you* are pathetic, Dawnpaw."

She fell rigid. She tried to deny Dovepaw's claim but deep down, she couldn't help but feel as though there was truth in what was said. She didn't want Brinepaw to get hurt, she just wanted to catch up. She needed to.

"Where is he?" Was all Dawnpaw could ask. She couldn't feel bad for herself and she couldn't defend herself.

"Apprentices' den. Be my guest, comfort you brother." Dovepaw spoke as she began to walk away, but she paused and gave Dawnpaw one final glance. "Just remember that this was your fault."

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Huddled in the corner of the den was Brinepaw, curled up with Leopardpaw beside him. She watched quietly, unsure on if she should interrupt them, however she had to make sure he was okay. It was the least she could do.

Slowly approaching them, Leopardpaw's golden gaze met her's as she sat up, the two sharing a long stare before Dawnpaw glanced at her brother.

"He's sleeping?" She asked quietly, only for her friend to nod slowly. Dawnpaw sighed, flinching when she felt Leopardpaw rest her tail on her shoulder gently.

"He'll be okay." She whispered softly, Dawnpaw looking at her with confusion. She expected the tabby to be mad.

"What happened?"

Leopardpaw held her gaze momentarily before looking at Brinepaw. After a few hesitant seconds, she gently nudged his paw out of his face to reveal a fresh scratch on his cheek. Dawnpaw felt her
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stomach drop, eyes widening in guilt. Her father had always been hard on them, but he never actually *hurt* them before.

"This is my fault."

"D," Leopardpaw whispered softly, "you can't control what your dad does." Her words were genuine, however Dawnpaw couldn't bring herself to believe them. Despite it all, she knew she had a deeper intention when she told her father, she just didn't expect him to react like this.

"I told him you won the spar. It was just a stupid fight, I didn't think he'd care-"

"Dawnpaw, it's okay. Calm down." Leopardpaw spoke a little more harshly, but her expression softened as she looked back down to a sleeping Brinepaw.

Dawnpaw followed her friend's gaze down to her brother, a painful knot forming in her stomach. Despite the fresh scratch on his face, he seemed so peaceful.

"Do you think he'll be mad?" She whispered after a small silence, her voice nearly breaking. She didn't look at Leopardpaw, but she could feel her golden eyes burning into her.

"Why would he? You didn't hurt him. This isn't your fault." She explained again, and Dawnpaw could almost feel the pain in her friend's voice. "I don't know what Dovepaw said to you, but I know it wasn't true. Please," she paused as Dawnpaw finally met her gaze, "believe me."

"I will." She whispered, however she wasn't sure she believed it, or she just wanted to reassure her friend. All she could do was hope; hope she wasn't horrible for wanting her father to finally notice her.

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As it would turn out, Leopardpaw's reassuring words didn't soothe the medicine cat apprentice, so Dawnpaw went to a source she knew would.
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Her mother.

The light gray she-cat was with Cypressfall and Frozenlily, the trio talking amongst themselves. Dawnpaw watched for a few moments, not sure if she wanted to burden her mother, however she eventually made her presence known with an overly awkward cough.

"Dawnpaw," Swanflutter smiled faintly, "is everything okay?"

No, it wasn't. But she couldn't say that in front of her mom's friends, so she nodded solemnly, but Swanflutter saw right through her.

"You two keep talking. I'll be back." She promised, Cypressfall giving her a small nod while Frozenlily smiled in response.

The mother and daughter then left camp, and Dawnpaw couldn't have been more grateful. Ever since she could remember, her mom had always known when she was upset and fortunately enough, she always knew how to make her feel better.

"Wanna talk about it?"

Dawnpaw contemplated the question for a few moments. If she explained her feelings, she would have to explain the situation, and she didn't feel like it was her place to say. Brinepaw could tell their mom if he wanted. How would Swanflutter react? Surely she wouldn't let Tigertaunt get away with what he did?

"Or we don't have to talk about it; just enjoy each other's company instead." The pale gray she-cat spoke in her daughter's silence.

"I'm sorry if you wanted to stay with your friends, it's just-"

"I would rather spend time with you." She assured, her green gaze holding nothing but warmth. Dawnpaw already felt herself growing more at ease.

"How's being a medicine cat apprentice?"

"Don't get me started." Dawnpaw groaned, her mother laughing in response. "Graypetal is the most *boring* cat I've ever met in my

entire life." She dramatically claimed. "He has absolutely no sense of humor. I don't know what stick got lodged up his rump, but it must be imbedded far enough to reach his brain and deactivate whatever qualities used to make him likable, and that's giving him the benefit of the doubt because on further evaluation, I don't know if there were any to begin with."

"Oh?" Swanflutter mused. "Well for your own wellbeing, I'd keep that diagnosis to yourself."

"Was planning on it, don't you worry." Dawnpaw reassured. "His other symptoms include an inability to detect sarcasm."

"Well I'm glad you've established enough knowledge to make these conclusions." Swanflutter kidded. "What else have you learned?"

"Nothing." Dawnpaw reluctantly admitted. "My memory is horrible. It's just herbs this, herbs that. I'm tired of herbs. Especially tired of the smell; gives me a headache every single day." She could feel herself getting worked up again, so she focused on her steps and matched them to be in sync with her mom.

"You know what I think?"

"What?" Dawnpaw queried, eyes settled on her paws.

"Learning can absolutely be a tedious process, but there's so much more you're missing." Swanflutter spoke, each word encouraging, but Dawnpaw wasn't sure she could possibly be missing anything.

"Imagine when you actually know what you're doing, how rewarding it'll feel when you save someone, or how beautiful it'll be when you get to help bring new life into this world. There is so much more to being a medicine cat than you're seeing. There is so much more to everything."

"I never thought of it like that." Dawnpaw admitted as her mother's words offered her a new prospective. She always assumed she'd be stuck in the learning part of it all.

"I'm glad I could change your mind." Swanflutter purred, softly nudging her shoulder, but Dawnpaw didn't share her laugh. Instead,

she felt her stomach drop as she paused abruptly, giving her mom a terrified look as a realization crossed her mind.

She had completely forgotten that Graypetal was going to be quizzing her.

chapter 5

The sun was settled high in the spotless sky, illuminating Dawnpaw's path as she raced through the rocky terrain, her mother hot on her heels. If her father knew she didn't even *show* for Graypetal's stupid quiz, she'd never hear the end of it.

Dawnpaw inhaled shakily as she made her way through and slowly approached the medicine cat den, quickly reciting the herbs in her head. Upon entering the den, she felt her stomach drop as her gaze snapped to meet her father's grim stare.

"Look who decided to join us." Graypetal muttered, Swanflutter soon entering the den after her daughter as the now four assembled cats sat in an uncomfortably long silence.

"I'm sorry, Graypetal." She murmured, her chin dropping, however Swanflutter placed her tail on her shoulder in reassurance.

"Swanflutter, don't comfort her." Tigertaunt hissed. "She needs to learn responsibility. Sheltering her from punishment teachers her *nothing."*

"The hostility isn't necessary, my love." Swanflutter spoke, her voice much more delicate. "She was with me."

"She's *my* apprentice." Graypetal then hissed at the bickering parents, and after a few painfully long seconds of silence, he continued speaking. "Let's just get on with the quiz."

"Do I have to have an audience?" Dawnpaw quickly retorted, feeling more confident with her mother beside her.

"You'll always have an audience, you need to learn to deal with it now." The gray tomcat explained as he grabbed the first herb in his jaws before softly placing it in front of her. They were leaves coated in a vibrant green hue with broad, shiny leaves.

Dawnpaw just stared at the herb, scrunching her face as she glanced at her mentor.

"Well? What is it?"

"I," she paused, staring deeply upon the leaf, "it's a leaf?"

"What kind?"

"I don't know." Dawnpaw confessed, sighing in defeat as she tried to distract herself from Tigertaunt's gaze tearing into her.

"Fine. This one is hard so I won't hold it against you." The medicine cat sighed in reluctance and Dawnpaw felt herself exhale in relief. "They are beech leaves."

Graypetal soon replaced the beech leaves with another herb; small flowers with blue star-shaped petals. The medicine cat then looked at her and Dawnpaw felt herself go into panic mode. They looked *so* familiar but she couldn't remember what they were called.

Every second seemed to last a lifetime as she switched her gaze from the herb, to Graypetal, to her mother, and finally landed with her father's unwavering gaze. His expression seemed far from pleasant.

Would he hurt her like he hurt Brinepaw? The mere thought alone made butterflies flutter in her stomach, and not the good kind. She could feel herself growing sick, her stomach churning mercilessly as she kept rotating her gaze between the herb and the three cats surrounding her.

"Graypetal!"

It seemed to be a gift from StarClan. Just as the stillness became unbearable, the strained voice of Sunstar broke the silence.

Tigertaunt perked his ears, blue eyes meeting the frantic gaze of his leader as he burst into the den. Sunstar seemed far from eased, his copper eyes widened in terror.

"What is it?"

"SpringClan ambushed our patrol! It's Duskfur, he's gravely wounded." The leader explained. Tigertaunt's demeanor completely changed as he hastily exited the den after their leader, Graypetal following.

Dawnpaw sat back as she watched her mother leave as well, her mind completely in chaos. Her stomach still hurt from the pressure, so the medicine cat apprentice gave herself a moment to calm her breathing before leaving the den.

Her clan seemed to fall into complete disarray as they surrounded the patrol, which only irked the white she-cat as they blocked her view.

"Move! Get out of the way!" She heard her mentor hiss, watching as the gray tomcat emerged with Duskfur leaned against him, Frostbird on his other side to keep him steady. Hesitantly, she followed, other warriors following suit.

"Get out! I need space to do my job." The medicine cat hissed, his yellow gaze unwavering as he held their worried stares. "Now!"

Dawnpaw watched as the others left the den before she looked to her mentor, and for once, she watched his gaze soften.

"You too."

"What?" Dawnpaw burst, blue eyes widening in protest. "I'm your apprentice!"

"Right now you're just taking up space," Graypetal spoke, softening his voice, "you're not ready yet."

Dawnpaw just kept his gaze for a few moments before she stormed out of the den, claws digging into the grass beneath her. However much she wanted to wallow in her anger, the apprentice wasn't allowed that courtesy as she heard Sunstar call a clan meeting.

The white she-cat looked at the assembling cats as she found Leopardpaw and Nightpaw in the crowd, padding towards them.

"This attack will not go unnoticed," her leader began— noticeably

still shaken from the event— as his copper eyes swept over his clan, "Flowerbee, you were the head of the patrol. What happened?"

The white-gray she-cat met her leader's gaze, her own eyes solemn. "We were patrolling the border near Fishcape when we were attacked. It was completely unwarranted."

"And you never crossed into their territory?" An accusing voice spoke up; Hawkhowl.

"No, we would never*!* They came into *our* territory!" Dovepaw hissed in defense of her mentor, however the calico was hushed by Flowerbee who continued speaking.

"We stayed completely within our own markers and were still attacked. No warning. No explanation. Not until after we were forced to surrender." Flowerbee continued to explain, ignoring Hawkhowl as she kept her leader's gaze. "Creamlily, that pompous SpringClan warrior, she said that Ivystar had a message for you."

"What message?" Sunstar asked, his once panicked voice falling into something low and suspecting, as if he already knew.

"That Fishcape belongs to SpringClan. Ivystar is giving us the *choice* to diplomatically cede claim of the pond. If we fail to do so, she threatens to take it by force." Flowerbee spoke, each word loud and clear for everyone to hear.

At this, the clan fell into yowls of protest. Dawnpaw could feel the energy shift as chaos ensued, which wasn't helping her already upset stomach.

"Fishcape has belonged to FallClan since the Era of Rebirth. Attempts at a cease have happened in past generations, and FallClan was victorious then. I have no doubt we will be victorious again." The FallClan leader explained. "Ivystar is young. She's ambitious. She's careless. She does not frighten me."

"This is crazy." Leopardpaw whispered, Nightpaw nodding in agreement.

"What do you think will happen?" Dawnpaw queried, however the

other two just shrugged before looking back to their leader.

"Sunstar, do you have a plan?" Southlight questioned, several others nodding to the question.

"I say we raid them! Show them they can't take what belongs to us!" Lakelily yowled, his blue eyes full of fury, however Sunstar silenced him with a single stare.

"Fishcape belongs to FallClan and it will continue to do so." Sunstar reassured. His gaze then fell to his deputy as the two shared a nod and Tigertaunt took over.

"We will send out longer patrols to Fishcape continually throughout the day. If Ivystar plans another raid, then me and Sunstar have decided that we will have no other choice but to declare war."

At the mention of war, the clan fell into quiet murmurs and the anger radiating from everyone dissipated into something much more terrifying. With nothing left to say, Sunstar dismissed the meeting, and Dawnpaw was left to wallow in a whole new wave of anxiety. Truth be told, she thought starting a war over a stupid pond was ridiculous.

"How's Duskfur?"

Leopardpaw spoke, interrupting her thoughts.

"I'm not sure. Graypetal kicked me out."

Leopardpaw tilted her head in confusion. "Why? You're the medicine cat apprentice."

"He said I wasn't ready."

"Great." Nightpaw mused. "Our fate will lie in the paws of a medicine cat who knows nothing about medicine."

Dawnpaw was going to protest, but it was no use. He was right, however much she hated to admit it. She had no idea what she was doing.

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Days passed and luckily for Dawnpaw, the looming threat of war distracted her father from the fact that she completely blew her quiz. She spent most of her time with Graypetal, trying to distinguish between the many different herbs. Slowly she was starting to memorize the common ones, but she still felt incredibly behind.

"Dawnpaw, I have a task for you." Graypetal spoke. "I need a new supply of borage leaves now that Silverpool is expecting kits. Do you think you can do that?"

"Yes!" The white she-cat nearly yelled, however she toned her enthusiasm down as her mentor glared at her. She was more than grateful she'd finally get to leave the camp. It had been days since she'd even been around her friends. Maybe she could bring Leopardpaw.

"Great. Remember, the flowers are a lilac hue and their stems are fuzzy." Graypetal explained, grabbing his limited stash to show the she-cat who nodded in excitement. However as Dawnpaw was about to leave, she paused abruptly as her mentor spoke once more.

"Flowerbee is going to be busy throughout the day so she's asked for Dovepaw to go. You should be able to find the leaves near that abandoned twoleg den close to camp. Don't go any further than that. If you can't find any, just come home."

Dawnpaw just stared at him blankly, and if he knew she was annoyed, he surely didn't care as he continued sorting his herbs. Huffing in annoyance, the white she-cat stormed out of the den where she was met by an equally annoyed Dovepaw.

"I hate you, you hate me, but I have a job to do so if you're going to whine the whole time, just stay behind." Dawnpaw didn't even hesitate as she glared at the calico.

"Don't worry," Dovepaw muttered as the two padded out of camp, "I wouldn't waste my breath on you anyways."
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"Hasn't stopped you before." She retorted.

The two apprentices walked in silence, and Dawnpaw wasn't sure if she appreciated that, or if she wished the calico would say something to break it. The two were dancing the line of discomfort and annoyance, which she found to be the worst combination.

Once they made it to the abandoned twoleg den, Dawnpaw's eyes were already scanning the unkept garden.

"So what are we looking for?"

"Borage leaves. They're small purple flowers with fuzzy stems." Dawnpaw explained flatly. The two began their search, closely examining the disturbed soil but to no use. The sun felt hotter than usual, and the more she struggled to find the herb, the more restless she got.

"I don't think there's anything here." Dovepaw stated. *You don't say*.

"Come on, let's go a little further. There's an old fence not far from here where we could find some."

"Flowerbee told me not to go far."

"Is Flowerbee here?" Dawnpaw challenged, finally meeting the calico's green eyes as she stared her down. "Are you scared, Dovepaw?"

She watched the dilute she-cat intensely, feeling a wave of satisfaction rise in her chest as Dovepaw shifted uncomfortably.

"No, I'm not scared."

"Great." Dawnpaw responded quickly with a condescending tone, and the two were off. The better part of her knew this was stupid, but the calico's discomfort was gratifying. Besides, Silverpool needed the leaves, but she duly noted that.

Their walk mirrored the previous one, awkward and silent. Well, awkward for Dovepaw she assumed. Dawnpaw was reveling in the feeling, just now realizing how much the other apprentice was at

her will just to prove herself. But Dawnpaw saw right through her. *Who's the pathetic one, now?*

Once they reached the fence, their search continued. Luckily it didn't take long before Dawnpaw found the herb spread all around the posts, so she and Dovepaw began gathering as much as they could.

"Okay, this should be enough." The white she-cat spoke through muffled words, but they both fell quiet as a gentle rustle whispered into their ears.

"It was probably just the wind, let's go." Dovepaw ushered, however Dawnpaw could tell she was nervous. The two fell silent again as the rustling got louder, and they both dropped the herbs, eyes looking around frantically.

After a few painfully long seconds, Dawnpaw felt her fur rise as three unfamiliar cats revealed themselves. They were definitely older than apprentices and smelt completely foreign.

One of them, a light brown tabby tom, stepped forward.

"Sunstar really let two bright-eyed, bushy-tailed apprentices out of camp by themselves. You two can't be any older than seven moons."

"Ivystar wasn't lying when she said he was a fool." Spoke another feline, a pale tabby she-cat. "What are we going to do with them, Harvestleaf?"

Harvestleaf, the brown tabby, met her gaze before looking back at Dawnpaw. "We'll take them."

"What?" Dawnpaw hissed, staring at him with widened eyes, hardly noticing Dovepaw completely leaned against her, shivering uncontrollably.

"They'll make good leverage." The she-cat commented, the others nodding in agreement.

"Here's how this is going to work," Harvestleaf began, "you both can come with us by choice, nice and easy. Or we can bring you the

hard way, and trust me, you won't win against three highly trained warriors."

Dawnpaw met Dovepaw's quivering gaze, and if her adrenaline wasn't racing because of the threat, she would've been surprised to see the calico so scared. If the situation was any different, she'd never let Dovepaw hear the end of it. However the situation *was* different, and Dawnpaw was terrified too.

"We'll come willingly."

chapter 6

The first time Dawnpaw could recall being scared goes back to when she was a kitten. She and Brinepaw had snuck into the warriors' den. They meant no harm, however later in the day, all the nests had been completely destroyed. Her father yelled at her and Brinepaw like he never had before and she remembered crying into her mother's fur the whole night.

Turns out, it was Dovepaw who had wrecked the den, and it was Dovepaw who blamed it on them.

Now, Dawnpaw was terrified once more, and the only other cat who she could relate this feeling to was— of all cats— Dovepaw.

Because no matter how much she *despised* the calico, they shared the same fear, and they shared the same goal.

Getting home.

Harvestleaf had brought them to an unused den. A prisoner den, it seemed. FallClan had one too, however she had never seen it in use. The den was unkept and bare, as well as small and dark. Dawnpaw was perched at one end of it, completely curled up by herself, and Dovepaw was on the other side. Despite being on opposite ends, the length wasn't far, and she could hear the calico's rapid heartbeat. So they sat in silence, both with drumming hearts, a thickness in the air making it hard to breathe.

Her ears immediately perked at the sound of approaching paw-steps, and the two apprentices both reflectively unsheathed their claws as the conjoined beating of their hearts roared even louder in Dawnpaw's ears.

She instantly recognized Harvestleaf, her eyes switching to a ginger tomcat beside him, before finally landing on a bicolored brown-white she-cat with green eyes. Dawnpaw examined her closely, taking in the gentle sway of her tail and the appearance of soft

paws. *She doesn't seem hostile yet*, Dawnpaw noted, before she met the brown-white she-cat's eyes. She looked young, around the age of Frostbird and Frozenlily.

"Greetings," the she-cat started, her tone neither aggressive nor friendly, "I'm Ivystar. This is my deputy, Yellowbird, and you've already met Harvestleaf."

She's trying to be diplomatic, Dawnpaw noticed, but she struggled to detect sincerity behind her words. The white she-cat kept her mouth shut as she slowly approached Dovepaw to stand alongside her, keeping her ears pinned and head low to show she was still complying.

"I don't wish you harm." Ivystar spoke again as she sat down, her tail curling around her paws. She seemed so informal, not adorning even a hint of presence Dawnpaw admired Sunstar for. I *would've never guessed she was a leader.*

"And so long you cooperate, you will be just fine. However," the SpringClan leader paused, gaze momentarily moving between the both of them, "the behavior of your clan makes our situation a little more tedious than I'd like."

To her shock, Dovepaw spoke up, her voice a fragile whisper, "When will you let us go home?"

"Soon, I hope. Fishcape is important to our clan, and to me. But senseless bloodshed is a waste. I hope to return you both home soon enough." Ivystar reaffirmed, her tone gentle and almost believable. *A good liar,* Dawnpaw will think. *Wonder what father would think of her?*

"The both of you are serving as our leverage to get Sunstar to cooperate." Yellowbird spoke this time, Harvestleaf nodding from beside him. "Once he agrees to surrender Fishcape to SpringClan, you'll both be escorted home, and no one has to get hurt."

"And if he doesn't agree to your terms?" Dawnpaw asked, nearly challenged, as her blue eyes narrowed on the brown-white she-cat before her.

"Let's hope it doesn't come to that." Ivystar replied quickly, her once relaxed tone dissipating into something lower. Her motionless tail uncurled from around her paws, now occasionally whipping back and forth.

"I'm the medicine cat apprentice. You can't hurt me." Dawnpaw retorted, ignoring the pleading looks Dovepaw was sending her. The SpringClan leader was quiet for a moment, her head tilting ever so slightly. The building tension seemed to crack at the medicine cat apprentice's statement, and the rising anger in Ivystar coalesced into a sudden curiosity which was transparent in the subtle expressions on her face and body.

"Oh, just you?" Ivystar asked in a tone that was nothing short from patronizing, though equally intrigued. "Your life is more valuable? It's worth more than your trembling friend beside you?"

"No." Dawnpaw responded, trying to maintain confidence, but her voice betrayed her as the words came out forced and weak, trembling in her throat.

"So what does it matter?" The SpringClan leader continued. "Medicine cat or warrior, neither one of you is more expendable than the other."

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"Do you think Sunstar will surrender Fishcape?"

Nightfall had settled, and despite many attempts to sleep, Dawnpaw couldn't. As Dovepaw spoke up, she felt eased to know the calico couldn't either.

"Honestly," the medicine cat apprentice paused, "I don't know. I hope he does, but-"

"You don't think we're a big enough price to pay?"

Dawnpaw fell quiet, finally meeting rounded sage eyes as she sighed, nodding in defeat.

"Yeah. Something like that."
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The two fell into another silence, but Dovepaw didn't say anything else, so Dawnpaw placed her head down and tried to sleep. When sleep never came, she let her mind wander. The warrior stationed to guard them was a white she-cat freckled in black who clearly had a much easier time falling asleep given how her obnoxious snoozing could be heard to deaf ears. For a split second she contemplated escaping, but then she'd have to make it out of camp, which was also guarded. Not to mention, she wasn't familiar with SpringClan territory.

"Hi!"

Dawnpaw nearly jumped as an overly enthusiastic voice traveled into her ears, her crystalline eyes resting with those of a deeper blue.

Dawnpaw didn't say a word, her heartbeat elevated once more as Dovepaw also sprung to her paws. The two FallClan apprentices had reflectively unsheathed their claws and perked their ears, bodies preparing to attack.

"I'm Bluepaw," the newcomer greeted, "everyone has been talking about you all day, I wanted to see you for myself. I'm not here to start anything, if that's what you're worried about. You two look like you've seen a ghost." The new apprentice commented. She seemed about their age, fur short and body slender. Her tail was held high with a curved tip which displayed her confidence. Her paws were soft and her ears were angled forward curiously.

"You can't just sneak up on cats you don't know, much less ones your clan is keeping for ransom." Dawnpaw hissed, her once perked ears now flattening.

"Aren't you scared you'd get in trouble for talking to us? Or wake our guard?" Dovepaw asked, but Bluepaw just glanced at the snoring warrior and expelled a sharp breath of amusement.

"That's Flurryfall; she's my mentor. She's also a deep sleeper."

"Right, well you've seen us." Dawnpaw muttered, eyes narrowing. "You can leave now."

"Excuse you," Bluepaw retorted, "before you get all hissy, I was just trying to help. However if I'm not wanted..." The gray she-cat trailed off, an obvious attempt at goading them. Dawnpaw wasn't impressed.

"What do you mean?" Dovepaw instantly asked, green eyes locking in on the SpringClan apprentice. Dawnpaw nudged her shoulder as she desperately looked at her dilute companion.

"We can't trust her, Dove." She muttered under her breath.

"She's right here, you know." Bluepaw retorted. "Besides, what do I get out of lying about wanting to help you when you've already been captured? Seems counterproductive, no?"

"Come on D, it's not like we have many options." Dovepaw plead and Dawnpaw flinched at the nickname, but alas, she gave in.

"Fine, but when your hopes get shattered because *she* betrays us, it's on you."

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She wasn't sure when, but sometime after Bluepaw left, Dawnpaw was able to sleep. It wasn't a deep sleep, but instead that weird in-between state. Like a halfway point, she supposed. Your conscience is present, but far away, and time seems quick. Similar to the kind of fever-induced sleep she experienced once as kit when she came down with a mild case of Whitecough.

Once morning came, the plan was in motion. Bluepaw mentioned that by the end of high noon when the sun would begin to fall, a vast majority of the clan would be absent from camp to attend a major training session evaluated by Ivystar and Yellowbird. When the time came, Bluepaw was going to distract Flurryfall, then give them the signal to proceed. She mentioned that all they had to do was make it to the warriors' den where they could escape through a small opening in the back.

Dawnpaw lay curled up in the prisoners' den, constantly going over the plan in her head. Every second, a new scenario of things that
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could go wrong would jump in her thoughts and she treated each intrusion with an intricate plan to control it, but the voices were loud and her body felt too unsafe to allow her brain much clarity.

"Do you think we'll be able to pull it off?" Dovepaw asked, her voice a soft yet welcome antithesis to the screaming thoughts in Dawnpaw's head.

"If Bluepaw isn't lying to us, then I think so. The warriors' den is close, and once we're out of camp, I think we'll have better odds."

"You think?"

"Yeah Dovepaw, I think. I can't promise we'll make it out." She sighed. "Besides, I don't exactly remember how to get home."

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The sun was slowly beginning to sink from the sky and Dawnpaw was far from calm. Bluepaw didn't lie. Ivystar was out of camp with nearly all of the apprentices and their mentors, just as she said. She didn't understand why Bluepaw was helping them, or what she got out of it, but figured she'd probably never know. Not like she had much time to wonder anyways.

"It's almost time." Dovepaw spoke as she looked at Dawnpaw.

"Yeah," she sighed slowly as she glanced at Flurryfall, "we're just waiting on Bluepaw's signal."

"You know," Dovepaw spoke after a small silence, breaking her gaze briefly, "I'm sure I'm the last cat you'd want to be here with."

"Yeah. You are."

Dovepaw nodded slowly, though instead of firing back, she just sighed.

"That's fair."

Dawnpaw looked at her curiously, a small shock of surprise running through her chest as she felt a pang of empathy for the calico. She
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hated Dovepaw, but it felt festered now; contained in walls of pity.

Swanflutter always told her that no one was fully evil, and no one was fully good, but that everyone was a mix of both. A simple sentiment, sure, but it was something Dawnpaw was beginning to understand beyond surface level. There are a lot of factors at play that can make someone act the way they do. Emotions and the reactions tied to those emotions are complex and intricately shaped by many different lived experiences. Dovepaw allowed the world to see the unfavorable shades of her. Dawnpaw kept them hidden. She felt guilt about that; guilt about casting judgment. Guilt about a lot of things, really.

Still, she didn't like Dovepaw any more than she had before, recalling the verbal attacks her and Brinepaw were subjected to because of her actions and the callous way she used words to inflict pain just as severe as a physical wound.

But she could empathize, and the next thing she knew, Dawnpaw was placing her tail on the calico's shoulder in an act of reassurance.

"We'll make it."

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Crimson light bled into the prisoners' den as dusk approached, the sun's vermillion glare descending over the horizon. Dawnpaw's heart was racing against her chest and as she hoped, Bluepaw had arrived, pulling out fake complaints to Flurryfall about not getting to go on the major training lesson that day.

She stepped beside her dilute companion who appeared more determined than the day before, which eased Dawnpaw. Seeing Dovepaw more confident gave her the determination she had been lacking previously.

The white she-cat watched intently, her stomach seeming to do flips as Bluepaw flicked her tail as their cue to go. The two prisoned apprentices gave each other a brief yet prolific glance; a silent pact that held more meaning than she could understand.
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Dawnpaw took the lead as she slowly and silently crawled out of the den, her companion's hot breath on her heels. Slowly, the warriors' den was approaching, and as they made it, their movements grew more messy.

"Here!" Dovepaw exclaimed as she found the opening, the two wasting no time as they both squished themselves between the small crevice.

"We did it!" The calico burst as Dawnpaw beamed back at her. Her adrenaline was pumping now, her fear mixed with newfound excitement. But she quickly forced herself to calm down, her eyes scanning the unfamiliar territory. The red sun was now halfway past the horizon, the sky a darkening blue behind it. Nightfall was soon approaching.

"Okay," Dawnpaw paused, "we're not in the clear yet. We have to get home." It was almost as if she spoke it into existence. Dawnpaw's ears perked at the sound of distant voices and paw-steps, and the two apprentices' excitement became short-lived. Ivystar and the others were returning sooner than expected.

"Run!" The white apprentice ordered, and instantly Dovepaw rushed past her, Dawnpaw quickly following suit.

The forest flew past her in blurs and Dawnpaw had no idea where she was going. All she knew was that she had to get away. She could feel her blood roaring in her ears and she was sure if her heart beat any harder, it would rip right out of her chest. The white she-cat didn't even think she could run as fast as she was now, but her adrenaline kept her going.

However, the two were forced to abruptly stop as they were met by two SpringClan warriors. They must've been off on their own because there was no way the training patrol could've caught them in this direction, and Dawnpaw silently cursed her own sloppiness. She allowed herself to get too excited.

"Why in StarClan's name did Ivystar leave them with Flurryfall, that incompetent bee-brain." One of the warriors spoke, but the other focused on the apprentices.

"Alright you two, fun's over. We'll take you back, and I suggest you start praying that Ivystar shows mercy for this act of foolishness."

"That'll happen." Dawnpaw hissed, Dovepaw looking at her with widened eyes, but the white she-cat kept her ground.

The two SpringClan warriors shared amused looks, clearly not threatened.

"Well alright then." One of them said far too calmly, and Dawnpaw felt her stomach drop as both warriors sprang forward to attack.

Her nervous system was fried at this point with her mind racing. Heart racing. *Everything racing.*

Dawnpaw watched as one of them charged at her, and in the few seconds before the attack, she went over every fight she had ever witnessed, every mental note she took, every move she could recall, how the winners won, how the losers lost. She had never fought before and she had never learned how to, but she was always analyzing, and she hoped that her observations would be her saving grace.

As the warrior neared, Dawnpaw messily moved to the side, but she lost balance. This gave the SpringClan warrior an upper-paw as they twisted around, and Dawnpaw felt teeth connect to her shoulder. As the pain pierced through her, she hissed, blind fighting as she let her extended claws recklessly swipe at their face. To her luck, she had managed to hit the wariror's face and they released their grasp on her shoulder. Dawnpaw tumbled to the ground, but she quickly regained her footing as she looked around frantically.

She remembered everything her father taught her about combat as a kit; maintain composure, maintain control. Dawnpaw swallowed her fear as her eyes landed on the warrior and she immediately crouched, circling them until she faced their back. She didn't waste a single second before she kicked off her hindquarters like she had seen Brinepaw do. She aimed her paws for their back, claws digging in as an irate yowl screamed into her ears, only making her dig deeper. Dawnpaw felt herself grow breathless as the warrior slammed her to the ground, but she managed to scramble away,

panting heavily.

She wasn't given much time to recover as Dovepaw caught her attention.

"Dawnpaw, I can't," the calico struggled to speak, "*breathe!"* Dovepaw finally croaked as the other warrior had a paw to her throat. Dawnpaw felt herself grow overly defensive, but she reminded herself to stay calm. She couldn't let anger take over. Not now.

Everything seemed to slow down as she glanced at the warrior she had been battling, who also seemed surprised by their clan-mate, before she glared back to Dovepaw's opponent who was only focused on the apprentice underneath her.

"Do you have no respect for the warrior code?" Dawnpaw hissed, her voice full of such deep animosity, even she was shocked. However she didn't waste time as she charged at them, the warrior snapping her head up as the white apprentice barreled into her, both falling to the side as Dovepaw released a breathless gasp, trying to make up for lost air.

Dawnpaw began rolling around with the warrior, the chaos of it all reminding her of the time Brinepaw and Leopardpaw sparred as the two battled for the upper-paw.

She ended up pinned by the warrior, her opponent's paws pushing hard into her chest.

"You just saved your friend, how sweet. Hope it was worth it." The she-cat whispered as Dawnpaw struggled underneath her grip, and she looked longingly to Dovepaw who only stared at her with apologetic green eyes.

Dawnpaw went limp as she inhaled as much breath as she could, and as her opponent began to believe in her supposed submission, she forced all her energy into her hindquarters and kicked into the she-cat's stomach like Leopardpaw had. After the weight had been lifted, she struggled to her paws, but she wasn't given any time to catch her breath as she aggressively pushed Dovepaw. "*Go!"*

She was out of breath, but she forced herself to keep going, trying to block out the burning pain in her legs. Faintly, the familiar scent of FallClan began to brush her nose.

"Look! We're almost home!" Dovepaw cried out, and this gave the white she-cat energy to push harder. Luckily, as they entered their territory, Dawnpaw felt a wave of relief wash over her as they were greeted by Flowerbee, Lakelily and Hawkhowl.

"It's over, Creamlily. You're outnumbered." Flowerbee spoke, her tone unwavering as she protectively stepped in front of the exhausted apprentices.

"This is only the beginning." Creamlily hissed in return, her pale azure gaze narrowing on the two apprentices before she looked back to Flowerbee. "Fishcape belongs to SpringClan, and Ivystar will do *anything* to ensure she gets it." She threatened, the two opposing groups holding their ground in silence as the threat lingered in the air. Alas, Creamlily retreated, and the two SpringClan warriors disappeared into their own territory.

"That clan is being led by an inexperienced, overly egotistical excuse of a cat." Lakelily hissed.

"I heard it was only a couple moons after her warrior ceremony before she was chosen as deputy." Hawkhowl added, Lakelily nodding his head in disapproval. "They're being lead by a child."

"Are you both okay?" Flowerbee then spoke after a few moments of silence, her previously risen fur slowly beginning to flatten.

"We're fine, just a little scratched up." Dovepaw murmured to her mentor, Dawnpaw nodding in agreement.

"Alright then, let's just get you two home." The white-and-gray she-cat said.

chapter 7

Her mind was all over the place, and in her final moments before sleep consumed her, Dawnpaw let her memories of returning home flood her mind. She was surrounded by her clan, and however much she was glad they cared about her return, she just wanted to sleep. Sunstar immediately questioned her and Dovepaw, however Graypetal advised they rest first. She wasn't the medicine cat's biggest fan, but she found herself more than grateful for him in that moment.

Soon the white she-cat awoke to the muted chirping of birdsong, blue eyes faintly opening as dawn light spread into the medicine cat den.

"Morning."

Dawnpaw glanced up to meet her mentor's ecru gaze, stretching her legs slowly as she sat up, shaking out the embedded pieces of her nest before turning to face him once more.

"Morning," she paused, yawning before shaking her head, "how long was I out?"

"You slept through the day and night. You must've been exhausted."

"That's an understatement." She mused feebly, however to her surprise, Graypetal chuckled in turn. Dawnpaw then noticed the cobwebs on her shoulder before glancing back to her mentor, her head tilting in a silent question.

"It's not bad," he spoke softly as he padded towards her, "probably won't even leave a scar." He spoke, however Dawnpaw just nodded.

"I'm guessing Sunstar and my father are gonna want to know what happened?" She sighed as she sunk back into her nest, tail curling around her paws as she watched the tip of her tail dust the ground in front of her.

"No, don't worry about it," Graypetal paused as he started sorting through herbs, "Dovepaw told them everything."

Dawnpaw was quiet for a moment, azure gaze fixated on her tail before the calico's name was mentioned, her eyes meeting his once more.

"Is she okay?"

"Yeah, she's fine. Only minor injuries," Graypetal paused as he met her gaze, "she was a little shaken up, Flowerbee said it took a toll on her. She's better today, though."

"Right." Dawnpaw spoke as her mentor continued sorting through herbs, letting the conversation fall into a comfortable silence. She was more than happy to be home and she strangely found solace in Graypetal's presence, watching him intently before she slowly dozed off into another nap.

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"How are you?"

Dawnpaw flicked a single ear as a soft voice traveled into her ears, blue eyes meeting a similar shade of blue as her brother situated himself beside her, a mouse between his jaws.

"I'm feeling a lot better." She responded, her tone more bleak than she had intended, however Brinepaw just nodded slowly before pushing the mouse towards her.

"We were all worried about you." He started slowly as he looked away, and for a brief moment, she glanced at him before looking back out, watching as her clan came and went on patrols. Dawnpaw wasn't sure how to respond. Her brother was not one to be tender, and the white she-cat wasn't sure she enjoyed it or felt uncomfortable by his efforts. It wasn't in their nature to get along and truth be told, Dawnpaw never even had much of a relationship with him at all. The only time she was around him was when they went out as a group.

"Thanks." She murmured quietly as she took a few small bites out of
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the mouse, an unsettling silence filling the air.

"You're a hero."

"What?" Dawnpaw queried, nearly choking on the mouse as she looked at her brother.

"Dovepaw said that you saved her life. Said you were the reason you both made it home."

Dawnpaw just held his gaze for a few seconds, blue burning into blue. Many thoughts ran through her mind as if it wasn't already a mess, however Brinepaw interrupted them.

"I don't know if I'm more surprised that you were able to defend yourself against two warriors, or that Dovepaw of all cats had nothing but praise to say about you." He mused.

"We," Dawnpaw sighed, "I don't know. I guess when you're trapped with someone, you're forced to get along."

"Does this mean you guys are friends, or whatever?"

"Absolutely not." Dawnpaw responded quickly as she placed her head on her paws, tail flicking irritably. "She still treated me horribly, that's not something I'll be able to forgive overnight."

"That's fair." Brinepaw murmured, mimicking his sister's movements as he softly placed his head on his paws. The two sat like that for a moment, but it was short-lived as they were interrupted by Sunstar, Tigertaunt and Graypetal.

"Evening, guys." Sunstar spoke, Dawnpaw glancing up to meet his copper gaze in an attempt to study them, however to no avail.

"Hello, Sunstar." Brinepaw spoke, confusion lacing his tone however he dipped his head in respect, Dawnpaw soon doing the same.

"If you wouldn't mind, we'd like to speak to Dawnpaw." Graypetal said. Dawnpaw and Brinepaw shared a confused stare before she gave him a sudden goodbye and followed the three cats out of camp.

Her stomach was twirling and she could only pray she wasn't in trouble, but what could she possibly be in trouble for? She had been sleeping on and off for the last couple of days.

"Dawnpaw, we've all been talking recently and we've come to the conclusion that we've potentially made a mistake." Sunstar spoke, Dawnpaw desperately trying to read his gaze. He didn't seem mad, but what could he be talking about? What mistake?

"It's not a secret that you've been," Graypetal paused for a small moment as he struggled to find the right words, "*falling behind.*"

"Yes," Tigertaunt spoke, his voice bare as usual as he continued on, "after what Dovepaw said, we think we were wrong in assigning you to Graypetal."

Dawnpaw was too stunned to speak, the words hardly registering in her brain.

"I was wrong to make you a medicine cat apprentice without asking you first, and I'm sorry for that." Sunstar spoke, and Dawnpaw didn't miss the way her father was staring at the leader as he continued speaking. "I'd like to assess your fighting skills, if that's alright with you."

"Unless you've had a change of heart." Graypetal mewed halfheartedly.

"Oh." Dawnpaw looked between the both of them. "Graypetal, I respect you, I really do-"

"Hush child, I was just teasing you. I know you want this." The medicine cat reassured, and Dawnpaw felt the weight lift from her shoulders as she looked back to her leader.

"Anything you want Sunstar, I can show you. This was always what I was meant to do." She spoke, trying to appear older than she was by containing her excitement.

"Don't get too ahead of yourself." Sunstar chuckled. "We aren't expecting you to be perfect. We just want to better understand your natural skillset." He continued to explain.

"Are you ready to begin?" Graypetal asked, and she nodded far more frantically than she could help.

"Okay," Tigertaunt started, slanted gaze narrowing on his daughter, "we're going to be going over a skill suited best for your age and size. It's called the leap-and-hold." The bengal began.

"A basic maneuver, but one that takes precision and strength. You will spring onto the back of your opponent with unsheathed claws. Like Tigertaunt said, this move is especially good for smaller cats going up against larger opponents. It puts you in a blind spot and protects you from their claws." Sunstar explained.

"Except your claws will be sheathed, obviously." Graypetal quickly added.

Sunstar nodded. "Me and your father will demonstrate."

Dawnpaw seemed to be buzzing with excitement, however she managed to compose herself as she watched her father and Sunstar get in position. She made sure to clear her mind despite her excitement, noting that she learned best off observation.

Tigertaunt took his stance, Sunstar's tail lashing slowly as he crouched, crawling in a zigzag before he jumped off his hindquarters. Dawnpaw noticed that his front legs were completely extended, giving him as much length as he could possibly get, which she kept noted in the back of her mind. The apprentice watched as Sunstar's paws met her father's back, softly gripping down. She watched the leader's shoulder blades wriggle as he got a deeper grasp before jumping off, both he and his deputy shaking out their fur.

"Not bad." Tigertaunt halfheartedly praised the leader, ear flicking. "For such a seasoned cat."

"Not too bad yourself." The leader mused before turning back to Dawnpaw. "Think you can try it?" Sunstar then asked as she nodded. Despite her thrill to be in the current position she was in, she was also delighted to see her father in higher spirits. It didn't happen often.

"Great. Dawnpaw, you will be performing the move on me."

The white she-cat felt herself grew rigid as her father spoke, her blue eyes meeting his own unwavering stare. She forced herself to swallow her nerves. This was her time to finally prove herself to Tigertaunt. Besides, as she noted previously, he seemed to be in a calmer mood. If any time was the time to prove herself, it was now when the stakes felt significantly lower.

Dawnpaw stepped forward before her eyes fell into slits and she fell to the ground like Sunstar had. In her head she went over everything he did, remembering all the notes she made, trying to find what felt most natural for her. Finally, she waited a few lingering moments before she jumped off her hindquarters, however she had miscalculated the leap and missed him, which resulted in a discouraging hiss from her father.

"That's okay, it was your first try. Give it another go." Sunstar prompted encouragingly, but her confidence was already dwindling. This time she went for another course, and as she made her way back to her original stance, Dawnpaw hurled herself towards Tigertaunt, extending her front paws as Sunstar had and to her luck, she felt them meet the deputy's back and she immediately dug her paws into his fur to gain a stronger hold.

"Excellent!" Graypetal beamed.

"The technique could use a bit of work, however that was really good Dawnpaw. Many cats struggle with that move, especially on the first day." The leader spoke, and Dawnpaw felt her confidence rise. She was determined to make her father proud, which gave the she-cat a stronger will to try even harder.

Sunstar and Tigertaunt then explained another move, the front paw blow, and demonstrated it to the pale she-cat. It seemed more simple, and Dawnpaw got it down the first try.

Though as her assessment went on, the thrill of her performance wasn't nearly as gratifying as the expression on her father's face shifting from annoyance into something much more impressed. He used to never notice her, and now he seemed *proud* of her.

She loved it.

Sunstar and Tigertaunt continued to show her more basic moves which she found naturally easy; instinctual even. Dusk was approaching yet the she-cat hardly noticed the passing time, completely consumed in the present.

"Okay Dawnpaw, you're doing excellent. It's time for your final move, however it's a series of the different ones you've already learned," Sunstar paused, "I want you to start off with a front paw blow, a leap-and-hold and then finish it up with an upright lock."

Dawnpaw nodded before she inhaled and exhaled slowly, trying to steady her beating heart. She began circling her father, her gaze meeting his chilling slanted stare, eyes examining the bengal before she abruptly halted by his side, crouching and kicking off her hindquarters to throw him off. Dawnpaw then hurled herself towards him, a sheathed paw coming down on his blind side before she stumbled away. She nearly lost her footing yet she managed to catch herself, not wasting time as she hauled herself onto his back. The transition was a little more sloppy than she would've liked, however she was able to pull it off. Dawnpaw kept herself situated, paws sinking in as she felt Tigertaunt start bucking. It took everything in her to remain on his back, trying to ignore the burning sensation in her shoulders. In order to pull off the upright lock, she'd have to exhaust him, but she was the one growing exhausted.

Dawnpaw then remembered the look which graced Tigertaunt's face whenever she succeeded, and that was enough to push her to hold on tighter. Seconds went by as the world blurred past her, painfully long seconds, until Dawnpaw felt her father manage to knock her off. She felt her breath leave her lungs however she forced herself back up and she watched him hurl towards her, eyes widening. *That was not supposed to be in the series of moves she was instructed to do.*

Dawnpaw was able to dodge the move, twisting around hastily as blazing blue eyes met another blue depth. Her heart was drumming as she dodged a few more of his attacks, before she leaped upon a rock, then to a log. In the heat of the moment, Dawnpaw felt herself grow a sudden surge of confidence, her nostrils flared as she was

now on higher ground. This gave her a brief moment to catch her breath before the apprentice found herself rearing onto her back legs, and with all the force she could muster, the she-cat came crashing onto her father. Though she was knocked down in the process, she was able to bring Tigertaunt down with her and that was enough to satisfy the she-cat.

"Remarkable!" Sunstar's voice fought its way to her ears over the loud drumming of her heart.

Dawnpaw stood with her father, both panting heavily as they stared at each other, a grin creeping upon his features, causing a foreign emotion to crash into her. All her life she told herself she didn't need her father's validation and that Swanflutter's love was enough for her, but it was this very moment which proved that Dawnpaw couldn't have been any more wrong.

"You put up quite the fight for someone your age." Tigertaunt finally spoke, nodding respectfully.

"She's incredible! It's rare that I've seen skill that early on. Such a natural talent!" Sunstar exclaimed, nearly tumbling over his words which made Graypetal chuckle from beside him.

"Not just gifted." The medicine cat spoke. "StarClan, she may just be a prodigy."

chapter 8

It seemed as if her whole world had flipped in just the matter of one day, and Dawnpaw loved every moment of it. The attention was something she didn't know she was lacking, but she quickly grew fond of it. After her session with Tigertaunt, Graypetal and Sunstar, it was decided she would transfer ranks, and to her utter shock, Tigertaunt immediately offered to take on her training.

The first cat she confided in was Leopardpaw, the two nearly leaping over each other in a haze of excitement. In the corner of her eye, she even caught Dovepaw's encouraging smile in the background.

Dawnpaw was alone now, standing beside her new nest in the apprentices' den, beside her best friend's like they had planned when they were kits. It all seemed to fall together perfectly in her favor and Dawnpaw was the happiest she had been in awhile.

Furthermore, the leaves were steadily falling from their limbs, coating the ground with what remained of their dead corpses. Mid leaf-fall had settled, and thus the gathering was upon them with FallClan as the host.

Each clan was named after a season, and in the course of the twelve-moon cycle, four seasonal gatherings were held. SpringClan hosted during new-leaf, SummerClan during green-leaf, FallClan during leaf-fall, and lastly, WinterClan hosted during leaf-bare.

Each clan would select a few cats to accompany the leader to the hosting clan's camp where all four clans would spend one or sometimes multiple nights together in peace. Due to FallClan hosting, everyone was busy, making sure there was enough prey to feed all the gathered felines expected by nightfall.

Within the timespan of gatherings, a meeting is held where the leaders discuss recent news, and the rest of the time is spent teaching and learning from one another. Playing games. Hosting

friendly challenges. Indulging in large, lucrative feasts. It was a grand event, one nearly every cat could take pleasure in.

"Hey you!"

Dawnpaw flicked her ear as an enthusiastic voice traveled into her ears, blue eyes meeting Leopardpaw's burning gaze.

"Hey." Dawnpaw grinned, batting her paw over her friend's ears playfully.

"We've been selected to go on one of the final hunting patrols in preparation for the gathering." The other apprentice eagerly informed her.

"Really?" Dawnpaw beamed, padding beside her tabby friend as they joined the patrol which consisted of both their mentors— Tigertaunt and Duskfur— as well as the twins, Frozenlily and Frostbird.

"About time you two joined us." Frozenlily halfheartedly scolded, swatting them both with her tail as her sister chuckled from beside her.

"What's the plan?" Duskfur queried, gaze meeting Tigertaunt's. He seemed a little tense, but Dawnpaw assumed it was due to the gathering. After all, Duskfur had been the one wounded by SpringClan warriors in their initial ambush, and now he was going to live with them for the next few days.

"I was thinking we head to Needle Point? Goldenfell mentioned it was full of voles the last time he was there." Frostbird suggested, Tigertaunt nodding approval.

As the patrol head off, the twins stayed near Tigertaunt as Duskfur took the end. Dawnpaw kept close to Leopardpaw, the two laughing about anything and everything.

She was more than content. Just a few sunrises ago she was sorting herbs, and now she was constantly out and more in tune with her clan and friends. She was *meant* for this, and she was glad her father finally realized it.

The journey to Needle Point wasn't far from camp, and once they arrived, they spent their time wisely in the pine-covered forest. When the patrol was satisfied, they returned home with the setting sun. To their luck, the other patrol— Flowerbee, Dovepaw, Goldenfell, Lionpaw and Southlight— had arrived shortly after them.

"Do you think this will be enough?" Flowerbee asked to an approaching Sunstar, his warm copper eyes scanning the abundance of gathered fresh-kill before meeting her gaze.

"This should be enough, thank you all." The leader kindly spoke, nodding his head to the two patrols.

"Anything else we need?" Goldenfell asked.

"No, brother." Sunstar replied, letting his eyes settle with Goldenfell before redirecting it to both returning patrols. "You've all worked tirelessly, take the rest of the evening off. We'll have our fun tonight."

"Dawnpaw!"

Dawnpaw flicked a single ear as another voice traveled into her ears, looking through the dispersing patrols to see Dovepaw approaching.

"What are you doing here?" Leopardpaw instantly hissed, and Dawnpaw could sense the energy shift as her friend grew defensive by the calico's arrival. However the white she-cat just placed her tail on the tabby's shoulder, a silent plea for her to calm down, which Leopardpaw reluctantly did as she padded away.

"Hey," Dawnpaw started slowly as she stared at the other she-cat, "what's up?"

"Nothing much." Dovepaw quietly said as she settled down, revealing a small mouse at her paws which she nudged to Dawnpaw, a hopeful glance in her sage gaze. "Wanna share?"

Dawnpaw was quiet for a moment, eyes moving warily between the mouse and pleading green eyes before she sighed softly, shuffling

over to make room for the calico.

"I'm a little nervous," Dovepaw blurted, her eyes focused on her fidgeting paws before she sighed slowly, "I mean, SpringClan kept us captive against our will, and now we're offering our home to them like it's nothing."

"Yeah, it's a little uncomfortable." Dawnpaw spoke quietly as she looked at the mouse, forcing herself to take a few small bites before she rested her head on her paws. She still wasn't entirely fond of Dovepaw and all she could do was go over all the times the calico's words had hurt her. Dawnpaw wasn't the forgiving type, and she *definitely* wasn't the forgetting type.

"Do you think Bluepaw will come?" Dovepaw then murmured, her voice continuously growing softer.

"I'm not sure," Dawnpaw paused, "I hope she does, though."

"Yeah, me too." Dovepaw spoke, sage gaze watching the entrance anxiously. As dusk was settling in, it was any moment before the other clans would arrive, and it finally hit the white she-cat. This was her first gathering, and once she reminded herself that she was in the safety of her own home, Dawnpaw's nerves were replaced with excitement.

Eventually, Dovepaw and Dawnpaw were joined by Leopardpaw, Lionpaw, Nightpaw, Tealpaw, Blossompaw and Brinepaw, the group chatting eagerly amongst themselves.

"You know, I heard Viperstar is one of the biggest cats the clans have ever seen." Nightpaw started, his dark yellow eyes shining eagerly.

"Is it true he's not clan-born?" Blossompaw asked.

"Yeah." Brinepaw confirmed. "Sunstar says that WinterClan aren't as strict about non-warrior blood."

"I think that's how it should be." Nightpaw spoke. "Besides, no matter how hard they try to keep it pure, most of us got outsider blood in us somewhere down the line."

"My mother isn't clan-born." Tealpaw said, both his sisters— Blossompaw and Dovepaw— shifting uncomfortably.

"Mom's been here since she was a kit, she's just as much a warrior as anyone else." Blossompaw said defensively.

"My grandmother wasn't clan-born either." Nightpaw shrugged. "It's really not that big of a deal."

Dawnpaw thought quietly to herself as her friends went back and forth on their heritage, but she remained quiet. As far as she was aware, her and Brinepaw came directly from the first lines of FallClan's founders. She knew it didn't matter; blood was just a physical indicator of consequence. But she couldn't help but feel proud.

"Look!" Leopardpaw blurted out, disrupting the other apprentices as she looked to the entrance of camp. "They're coming!"

Dawnpaw felt her heart flutter as the first clan began to swarm the entrance, the cats all unfamiliar to her. They were lead by a sleek white-and-gray tomcat.

"SummerClan, I think." Tealpaw spoke as he watched intently.

"How do you know?" Lionpaw asked.

"Because that's Fallowstar." He explained, tail pointing to the white-gray tomcat leading them. "Do none of your mentors talk about the other leaders? Frozenlily told me all about them."

He was right. Dawnpaw watched as Sunstar greeted the SummerClan leader, the rest of her clan conversing with the foreign warriors who seemed to know each other.

Eventually WinterClan flooded into their camp, led by Viperstar. And yes, he *was* big. A dark brown bengal tomcat with bright amber eyes. She watched Sunstar greet him too, and their interaction seemed even more friendly than the former. This didn't surprise her, many talk about the winter during Sunstar's youth that devastated FallClan. WinterClan had offered aid during the time of crisis, so she assumed the two must have some kind of history.

She watched for a moment before redirecting her gaze back to the entrance, still eager to see SpringClan. She wanted to see Bluepaw. She wanted to question the blue-gray she-cat more than anything. Why did she help her and Dovepaw? What did she get out of it?

Endless voices filled the air as conversations bled through her ears, the scent of her clan mixing with multiple foreign scents. Intently she waited, Dovepaw alongside her, both watching the entrance with unwavering eyes.

Eventually SpringClan emerged, and Dawnpaw felt Dovepaw tense beside her. She offered the calico a reassuring glance before looking back to the approaching clan.

Immediately her eyes landed on the brown-white leader of SpringClan; Ivystar. She walked slowly before pausing, Yellowbird beside her, both of them watching their clan come in. Dawnpaw's eyes danced around the new wave of cats, trying to ignore their painfully familiar scent before her eyes landed on Flurryfall, the cat who had been guarding them.

"That's a good sign," Dawnpaw whispered into Dovepaw's ear, "if her mentor is here, I'm sure Bluepaw is too."

The two stared at each for a few moments before redirecting their gaze back to SpringClan. Simultaneously, they both grew rigid at the sight of Creamlily. Dawnpaw had to remind herself that she was safe and that it was against the warrior code to stir any kind of violence during a gathering, which was a time of peace. After a few more cats flooded in, Dawnpaw felt herself ease up as her gaze met a familiar pair of lively blue eyes; Bluepaw.

The apprentice immediately met their gaze, a grin crossing her face as she padded over, two other apprentices following her.

"I was hoping I'd see you two." The blue-gray she-cat purred, her eyes as bright as they were the first time they met her.

"Hi, Bluepaw." Dovepaw greeted, Lionpaw and Nightpaw exchanging confused glances.

"You know each other?" Blossompaw queried, her tone just as cynical as her suspicious gaze.

"Yeah, she hel-" Dawnpaw paused abruptly as she frantically met Bluepaw's gaze, not sure if the SpringClan apprentice wanted that information out, however she relaxed when Bluepaw giggled in response.

"I helped them escape." She boasted.

Blossompaw only flicked an ear, her gaze still uncomfortably doubtful. She seemed uncertain, maybe confused, but she did not respond.

"I'm Bluepaw," she greeted, completely oblivious to Blossompaw's distrust as she turned to the calico beside her, "and that's Brindlepaw."

"And I'm Cicadapaw." The other spoke, a ginger tomcat.

She nodded to them both, watching as Dovepaw introduced their own friends. The group of apprentices talked amongst each other, and Dawnpaw was more than surprised to find she was glad to be back in the blue-gray she-cat's presence. Her previous want for answers dwindled, getting too caught up in conversation. Her curiosity still burned in the back of her mind, but she never found the right time to ask any questions. She wanted it to be a private conversation anyways.

The apprentices were forced to come to a close as the four leaders made it to the Highledge. Dawnpaw settled between Leopardpaw and Brinepaw, eagerly awaiting for the leaders to begin.

"Clans of the Seasons, the Hour of Mooncrest is upon us. Please gather before the Highledge so that we may begin." Fallowstar's voice boomed, his commanding tone calling for silence of the conversing cats around her. She noticed a white-and-orange tomcat take place behind him; Fireflare, she assumed. The SummerClan deputy.

As all the cats gathered, the rest of the present deputies and

medicine cats of each assembled clan took place behind their leaders. The moon was situated high in the dark sky now, brightly illuminating the gathered cats in an almost dreamlike glow. A small part of her was saddened by the fact that she could've been up there had she remained under Graypetal's training, but it was a small price to pay for becoming a warrior, and a price she was more than willing to pay.

As everyone gathered, Viperstar stepped forward. With better vision now, she noticed faint gray fur which speckled his jaw and chin. His eyes were tempered by time, carrying the sights of many moons past. He was surely the oldest leader there, but his age did not weaken him. He held himself with a level of poise that his fellow leaders couldn't quite match. As she watched, Dawnpaw imagined herself up there; older, weathered like the bengal tomcat, adorning a level of presence that commanded respect and attention.

"First, I'd like to thank Sunstar and the members of FallClan for welcoming us into your home once again. You've all prepared a magnificent feast, and in the coming days, my warriors and I hope to give back in any way we can." The WinterClan leader thanked, holding Sunstar's gaze as her own leader dipped his head in silent thanks.

"Green-leaf has been kind to WinterClan. The river has been plentiful and I found the sun more forgiving this season." Viperstar continued speaking. "Though I must admit, no matter how much fur is lost, my warriors are celebrating the return of colder days." He added lightheartedly.

"And by the grace of StarClan, we finally have a new medicine cat apprentice; Fablepaw." He introduced, his voice encouraging as he stared down at a russet tomcat who Dawnpaw guessed was Fablepaw. "Sandsong and I worried many moons about a lack of successor, but our prayers have finally been answered." As he finished, the gathered cats erupted into a small cheer before being silenced by Sunstar.

"I'm glad green-leaf has been kind to you, and I offer my personal congratulations to you, Fablepaw." Sunstar mewed in turn, his copper gaze resting softly with the new medicine cat apprentice

before he continued speaking. "FallClan has also thrived this season and we are more than prepared for leaf-fall. We've had an influx of apprentices and one of our queens, Silverpool, has recently kitted." The light ginger tomcat explained. "Silverpool, if you may."

Silverpool nudged forward two kittens, her tail curling around them. "Their names are Hiddenkit and Fernkit."

"Kits are always a gift to be celebrated," Fallowstar nodded to Sunstar before looking back to the assembled cats, "as expected, SummerClan has also thrived in green-leaf. We're meant to prosper in our respective seasons." The white-gray tomcat spoke proudly before he looked towards two cats behind him. "We too have a new medicine cat apprentice. Silentfeather, introduce her."

Silentfeather, the SummerClan medicine cat, nudged the sable she-cat softly. "Her name is Darkpaw."

The little black she-cat nervously flicked her tail, ears pinned sheepishly as another small cheer erupted. SummerClan were known to be the most celebratory of the four clans— to Darkpaw's dismay it seemed.

"It's nice to see things in order." Finally, Ivystar spoke. Her voice was low and expression unreadable.

"Before I begin, I'd like to apologize for our late arrival." She continued. "The journey was quite tedious."

"I assumed you would fare quite well. You seem all too familiar with our lands these days." Sunstar immediately shot back, and despite his words being accusatory in nature, his tone was devoid of any true challenge. He wouldn't start a dispute at a gathering, but he wasn't going to let her go unanswered either.

The SpringClan leader grew deafeningly silent and Dawnpaw couldn't help but hold her breath, her eyes anxiously meeting Leopardpaw's golden gaze before looking back up to the leaders.

"SpringClan warriors are stronger than ever and we've also had an influx of apprentices *and* kits. The twolegs we spoke about last

gathering have completely vanished without a trace, and like you all have said, prey has been plentiful for us as well." Ivystar spoke, each word more confident than the next. Dawnpaw exhaled shakily, relieved that the she-cat did not mention Fishcape.

Until every cat froze as another voice rose up in the crowd.

"If your warriors are so well fed, why are you so adamant on taking Fishcape?" Spoke the callous voice of Lakelily, his eyes slanted to slits. Dawnpaw could feel the air shift.

Quiet murmurs rippled through the crowd and Dawnpaw kept her gaze glued on the SpringClan leader, however her gaze was completely void.

"FallClan has access to the Silverrun River with SpringClan and the Smallmoon Lake with SummerClan. For generations, SpringClan has relied on a single brook for water, one that runs dry in cruel summers or is infested by twoleg children during their migrating season. Fishcape is only mouse-lengths away from the border, and should've belonged to SpringClan moons ago. You have your fair share of water sources, more than you need. It is a true testament to the greed FallClan was founded on." Ivystar spoke.

"That's a whole load of fox-dung and you know it!" Hawkhowl hissed, other FallClan cats yowling in agreement.

"Eastbound of SpringClan territory is unclaimed land." Flowerbee spoke up this time, her voice calmer than the rest of her clan. "There is no one stopping you from securing that vacancy. There is no need to take what already belongs to us."

"You even kidnapped two of our apprentices from their own territory." Frostbird spoke, which resulted in immediate gasps from the gathered cats. Dawnpaw felt her heartbeat quicken as she sank into Leopardpaw's fur, almost trying to hide herself in her friend.

"The apprentices are just fine, aren't they? It was leverage and good leverage at that." Ivystar hissed, her gaze growing terrifyingly daunting.

"Enough." Sunstar spoke up, and though his voice was authoritative, Dawnpaw didn't miss the flicker of worry beneath his copper eyes. "This is a personal matter, not one suited for a communal meeting."

"I think we've said everything that needed to be said," Fallowstar started carefully, "it's getting late."

"Indeed." Viperstar agreed, him and the SummerClan leader both sharing a look of judgement. To who? Dawnpaw wasn't sure.

"Of course." Ivystar responded, the coldness in her voice turning into a quieter condescension. "Gathering dismissed."

Dawnpaw remained glued in place as the assembled cats broke apart, her eyes stuck to the cats of SpringClan who kept to themselves.

"Well that was intense." Nightpaw joked, however no one shared his amusement.

"Yeah," Bluepaw spoke, "Ivystar is-"

"Delusional." Blossompaw finished for her, tone apathetic as usual.

"How? For making strong claims? Nothing she said was wrong." Cicadapaw hissed, however he calmed himself down as Brindlepaw gently placed her tail on his shoulder.

"Flowerbee is right." Dovepaw retorted back, seeming to come back to her fiery senses. "SpringClan has a vast amount of unclaimed territory available to them. Ivystar doesn't need to take our land, she just wants it to satisfy her own ego."

"Let's just leave it alone. I don't want a repeat over what just happened." Lionpaw pleaded.

"It's been a long day, I'm gonna go to sleep," Bluepaw started hesitantly as she glanced at each of them, "I'll see you all tomorrow."

It was a shared sentiment to call it off for the night. As the group of apprentices broke away, Dawnpaw couldn't help but let her mind

explode with a thousand different thoughts. She didn't bother sleeping, she knew she'd never be able to with her enemy sleeping on the same grounds, so instead she watched until the sun rose the next morning.

Hopefully, she'd get to sleep all day and excuse herself from being anywhere near SpringClan.

chapter 9

The following days remained relatively neutral. Though the cats of SpringClan kept their distance from FallClan, the tension which arose from the first night's meeting seemed lost to the wind. Though a few tense moments and hardened stares, the gathering played out as it always does. Spars were held, major hunting parties hosted, knowledge of new treatments shared. *Everything was fine*. That's what she told herself, at least.

Dawnpaw watched a lot of the interactions from a distance, feeling a little silly for her past anxieties now. Occasionally she'd settle with Bluepaw and Dovepaw, the trio speaking about anything lacking substance.

She still wanted to question Bluepaw over her willingness to help, or ask her how Ivystar reacted. Did she know it was Bluepaw who helped them? It's not like the blue-gray feline was keeping that information to herself.

However every time she was with the SpringClan apprentice, she wasn't alone. Though truthfully, she kept forgetting in the moment. Bluepaw was charismatic. She always knew the right thing to say and exactly how to say it. There was never a lull in conversation; never an awkward silence. When Dawnpaw struggled to find words or ways to move the conversation, Bluepaw always filled the gap in a way that felt natural.

Dawnpaw was impressed though equally annoyed. While they talked, she would sometimes zone out and listen to the gray she-cat talk to Dovepaw, observing her responses and delivery to try and ingrain them in her mind. It's not that Dawnpaw was shy, nor was she really the type to be awkward, but she wanted the skill Bluepaw had. She wanted to be able to command a conversation the same way, but not in a way that felt authoritative. She wanted others to see her the same way she saw Bluepaw.

It was allure, and yet that pang of jealousy still remained. Envy was

bred from success, and she wanted the admiration she so willingly gave away.

Eventually the third day came and went, and the other clans said their goodbyes and parted ways.

Despite the feigned peace that transpired, Ivystar still seemed hellbent on taking Fishcape if that first night was anything to go by, so Dawnpaw reminded herself to stay far away from the pond for the time being.

As the days dragged on, she spent almost every waking moment with Tigertaunt. Her entire days seemed to consist of constant training just for her to return home and instantly sleep, but she told herself she didn't mind. She was good, and Tigertaunt knew it. She was starting to rely on his praise, almost *needing* her father's validation. She supposed she wanted to make up for lost time.

This began to build a wedge between not only her friends, but Brinepaw too. She guessed it made sense, her father seemed to completely forget he even had a son. She wondered what it was like for her brother who was once the favorite, and now she was.

Half of her empathized with him, she even felt a little guilty about it. However the other half of her was sickly satisfied, as if she almost *wanted* him to hurt to understand how she felt when she was younger.

She hated that part of herself and she tried to tell herself that the thoughts were strictly intrusive, but deep down, she knew they weren't.

As the days grew shorter and passed quicker, leaves began to fall from now barren trees while the winds held a painful chill. She was getting older, and soon, her warrior ceremony would be approaching.

The white she-cat was assigned to a patrol with her father, Brinepaw, Sunstar, Blossompaw, and her mentor Meadowlark. It wasn't the cats she would've picked to patrol with, given how she had been on the outs with her brother and Blossompaw was the one

she favored the least out of her nursery-mates. But Bluepaw wouldn't complain, so she tried her hardest to be pleasant if she wanted to successfully be like the SpringClan apprentice.

Dawnpaw did attempt to make small talk with Brinepaw, but he was clearly not interested in talking to her. He wasn't unkind, but his avoidance was telling enough.

"I did not want to mention this back in camp," Sunstar began as he lead the patrol, "but Spottedbee came to me and Tigertaunt this morning. He believes he found fresh SpringClan scent near Fishcape." The leader announced.

"I suppose I was foolish to believe Ivystar's antics were just a summer thing." Meadowlark mewed. "Or hoping the threat of winter would get her to focus on issues that actually matter."

"The threat of winter only gives her more of an incentive." Tigertaunt replied. "A shame she's pushing for conflict when her clan will not be at their strongest."

"Does she not have warriors who could advise her? Or elders?" Brinepaw asked, walking shoulder-to-shoulder with Sunstar. The leader looked down at his apprentice and sighed.

"I imagine not everyone in SpringClan approves of her adamancy, but ambition like that is hard to tame."

Eventually the group arrived at Fishcape, and despite the building animosity growing around the small pond, it seemed so tranquil. Sunlight reflected off the water, glimmering in the stillness as a light breeze danced through the pondweeds. The smell of wet soil and faint pine settled within Dawnpaw's nose. She opened her mouth to taste the air, but was met with something else.

"They were here." She confirmed, ears flattening to her head.

"And how can *you* tell?" Blossompaw asked with typical skepticism.

"Because I *lived* with them. I know their scent." Dawnpaw fired back, eyes narrowing on the sable she-cat before her. Blossompaw held her gaze, but she did not respond.

"It's strong too. They wanted us to know they were here." Meadowlark confirmed as she glanced at her brother— Sunstar— who shared her understanding. "They're goading us."

"If Ivystar wants a fight, she needs to stop hiding behind these petty insinuations." Tigertaunt hissed. "If she won't get her claws out, we will need to pry them out ourselves if this conflict is ever meant to resolve."

"What are you implying, father?" Brinepaw asked, but the question didn't sound unsure. Sunstar glanced at his apprentice before looking back to his deputy with reluctance. Everyone knew what Tigertaunt was implying, but they all seemed to need the verbal confirmation.

"War."

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Once returning home, Sunstar and Tigertaunt held a brief conversation with Graypetal before calling the meeting

"Cats of FallClan, gather below the Highledge for a clan meeting!" Sunstar's voice echoed against the camp. The urgency in his tone elicited a confused and anxious reaction from the cats who had remained home as they slowly gathered below.

"What's going on?" Leopardpaw quickly asked as she joined her friend at the bottom of the ledge. "Did something happen on the patrol?"

"Yes, well, no." Dawnpaw sighed in frustration. "Just listen."

"I don't wish to worry you." Sunstar began as his eyes danced over his gathered clan. "But it was brought to my attention that fresh SpringClan scent was found at Fishcape, which I can now confirm."

Immediately the breathless silence of FallClan broke out into yowls of anger and fear, and Dawnpaw could feel the familiar sickness in her stomach start to burn as she flattened her ears.

"*Silence*!" Tigertaunt's booming voice broke the sound of building
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chaos as it was apparent that Sunstar was growing overwhelmed.

Everything fell still for a moment. Dawnpaw could feel her heart pounding against her chest and the hot, uneven breath of Leopardpaw on her neck.

"How are we to proceed?" A softer voice broke the building tension; Swanflutter. Dawnpaw watched as her mother's green eyes locked with those of her mate before she redirected them to Sunstar.

Something flickered beneath Sunstar's eyes at her question. Defeat maybe? Disappointment? Apologetic even? Dawnpaw couldn't tell.

"I have led FallClan through many moons of peace and prosperity." The leader began solemnly. "I fear I may have grown too comfortable by it. You all deserve a leader who is steadfast. I worry I have failed you all in that regard."

"*You are* steadfast, Sunstar. The peace you have offered us is not a show of weakness. We've flourished under your reign." Flowerbee spoke up from where she stood beside Swanflutter. "Whatever must happen now, we will follow you."

Sunstar was quiet for a moment, and within that small window of time, Dawnpaw wondered if he was going to change his mind despite the reassurance. However her doubts were calmed as Sunstar spoke again.

"Fishcape has been threatened in past generations, and those threats fell short." He began. "With the attack of the patrol that wounded Duskfur, the kidnapping of our apprentices, the verbal threats from the gathering and now this," he paused, "I see no other option but to declare war."

Another mixed uproar erupted from the gathered cats, some of it inaudible, others disapproving.

"War? Over a single pond?" Creekwillow, an elder, questioned. "I do not wish to take the side of our enemy, but Fishcape is not what sustains us."

"Perhaps you're too old to remember what that pond has done for

us." Lakelily hissed, others murmuring agreement.

"Watch your tongue when you speak to your elders." Sunstar commanded, trying to garner any control of the situation before it transpired into chaos.

"Or maybe grow a spine. Lakelily is right, that *single pond* was one of the only reasons we made it one leaf-bare." Hawkhowl defensively added.

"*Hawkhowl*." Tigertaunt spoke, tone low and threatening. The two kept each other's gaze and Dawnpaw was beginning to worry the two were about to fight in the middle of camp.

However Sagefrost, another elder who had raised Hawkhowl as a kit, approached the two toms who seemed ready to pounce at any moment and placed his tail on the shoulder of his adopted son. "Calm yourself. You are better than this."

Hawkhowl held Tigertaunt's gaze for a few more painfully long seconds before the intervention caused the tension to shrivel and he reluctantly relented. Tigertaunt did not even attempt to hide his satisfaction before he leapt onto the Highledge to take his place beside Sunstar and Graypetal once more.

"So we wait?" Goldenfell finally broke the tension, redirecting the suffocating energy towards him. "Or are we to argue our way to victory?"

"I am *done* waiting." Sunstar immediately answered, not even a hint of hesitation to be found in his voice as he looked to his deputy and medicine cat.

"As the three of us have agreed upon a declaration of war as commanded by our noble code, our next course of action are two consecutive raids." Tigertaunt took over, almost instinctively stepping ahead of his leader as his eyes danced over the assembled clan below him. "Once we surrender the first, Ivystar won't be expecting the second."

"The cats chosen for the raids have already been picked, and the

first will set out at tomorrow's daybreak." Graypetal added.

Dawnpaw felt her heart stop as she and Leopardpaw shared a nervous look, and while the sickness in her stomach did not necessarily fade, she felt it shift into something more thrilling than her previous felt panic.

"I will lead the first raid, accompanied by Frozenlily, Spottedbee, Goldenfell, Duskfur, and their following apprentices. So Tealpaw, Nightpaw, Lionpaw and Leopardpaw. Cypressfall and Hawkhowl will also accompany us." Tigertaunt announced.

Dawnpaw felt her chest swell with instant disappointment as her and Leopardpaw shared another look, Leopardpaw with exictement but Dawnpaw with a confused sadness. It took her tabby friend a few moments to understand, but once she did, her eyes dimmed.

"*I'm not going*." Dawnpaw whispered, trying to mask her hurt. "All the other mentors are bringing their apprentices, but father is leaving me behind."

Leopardpaw just looked at her sympathetically, but was unable to answer as Tigertaunt spoke up once more.

"The following night, I will once again lead the second raid." Tigertaunt continued to explain. "Alongside Sunstar, Flowerbee, Meadowlark, and our apprentices Dawnpaw, Brinepaw, Dovepaw and Blossompaw. Lakelily, Southlight and Frostbird will accompany us."

Dawnpaw felt herself relax as her name was called, barely even feeling Leopardpaw nudge her shoulder encouragingly. Perhaps she shouldn't feel relief for being called to battle, but it was far less scary than being forgotten.

"What if we lose the second raid, too?" Southlight questioned, everyone growing unbearably quiet as they looked up to the deputy and leader who shared brief glances before Tigertaunt spoke next.

"We won't."

chapter 10

There wasn't a single word which could explain the multitude of emotions Dawnpaw was feeling. Her mind felt heavy with an uncomfortable pressure that felt close to exploding, and yet her heart drummed with the thrill of battle that was so close to meeting her claws.

The remaining light from the fading sun covered the ground in a red hue, making her white paws look nearly pink as she squinted against the unforgiving rays.

Just one more night, she thought nervously.

Tigertaunt had already left with the first raid and she had nothing but relentless nerves. As soon as the moon peaked in the sky, she knew her clanmates would be tangled up in the claws and teeth of SpringClan.

She worried about Leopardpaw, silently cursing that her and the tabby weren't in the same raid. At least Dawnpaw got to be in the victory raid, because as the first raid would return home seemingly defeated, Tigertaunt was to lead the second for another hit. Dawnpaw would be with them, and by tomorrow's nightfall or maybe even the break of the following day, she would be heading home with her clan to celebrate their triumph and the protection of Fishcape. She wasn't sure if excitement was the right word to explain it, but she was more than ready to defend her clan.

Though something was bothering her, and she wasn't sure who she could talk to because simply, she didn't think they'd understand; even Dawnpaw struggled pinpointing whatever it was that was daunting her. Brinepaw told her he wasn't upset with her, but it was obvious that he was. Her best friend was out bleeding for their home, so Dawnpaw couldn't confide in her. She thought about Swanflutter, but her mother wouldn't understand her feelings, even though she'd try to. Dawnpaw didn't know what she needed reassurance on and she didn't know what was upsetting her, but she

did know who would understand where she was coming from, even though she hated to admit it.

Dovepaw.

While the rest of her clan were off in groups as they prepared for the next raid, the calico was on her own in silent solitude, just as Dawnpaw was. The two were in an uncomfortably awkward position, hanging over the delicate line of something Dawnpaw didn't understand. She was aware that Dovepaw had been trying to make amends ever since they were kidnapped, but Dawnpaw was way too stubborn to completely forgive her because of an overnight change of heart.

She also wondered if Dovepaw would still be tormenting her if the two weren't forced together back in SpringClan.

The white she-cat wasn't left to think about it for long as she felt her paws carrying her to the other apprentice, because despite everything, Dawnpaw knew that deep down, she had grown to have some kind of care for the calico. Or maybe it was simply intrigue. But then she remembered seeing Dovepaw with Creamlily, her sage eyes— normally so smug and self-satisfied— instead full of raw, genuine fear that made Dawnpaw's heart drop. So no, it was not *just* curiosity, and she suddenly felt embarrassed. For what reason? She did not know.

"Hey," Dawnpaw began slowly, "can I sit?"

Dovepaw's sage eyes instantly flickered up, blinking slowly for a moment before she made room beside her. Dawnpaw felt a small wave of relief at the other apprentice's acceptance as she laid beside her awkwardly, stiffening as their fur slightly brushed. Dawnpaw immediately wanted to leave, regretting ever coming over as the heat began to rise in her chest again. Suddenly, she redirected the annoyance from the situation and unfairly channeled it to the calico beside her, because this feeling of inadequacy and embarrassment was all her fault.

"I feel weird." Dawnpaw finally blurted out, her tone colder than she had meant it to be. Breaking her gaze away from Dovepaw, she

laid her head on her paws.

"I get what you mean," The calico sighed, seemingly unbothered by the coldness of Dawnpaw's tone, "I feel nervous, but I don't know what I'm nervous of. I've dreamed of the day I'd go into battle since I was a kit, but it feels different now."

"Yeah," Dawnpaw paused, hesitant to continue saying what she had planned in her head, "I think it's because of-"

"Creamlily nearly killing me?"

Dawnpaw just stared at her, a little stunned by her bluntness, but she just nodded before Dovepaw spoke again.

"SpringClan may be ruthless, but we'll have backup this time. We'll be *okay*." The calico spoke, but her words felt more directed at comforting herself. Despite that, Dawnpaw felt her frustrations ebb away, and suddenly the contact of the other she-cat's fur brushing against her own didn't feel so painful.

The two sat in a comfortable silence after that, hearts finally steady and in sync. Dawnpaw let her blue eyes flicker briefly to the multicolored she-cat beside her, and for a moment, she believed the words she said. They would be okay, if not in the battle waiting for them at tomorrow's nightfall, then in this one fleeting moment. And for now, in this fragile and transient bubble they were in, that was enough.

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As the raid returned, the clan was sent into a frenzy. Dawnpaw was instantly by Leopardpaw's side, the tabby not nearly as lively as before. Her gaze was dull, her fur matted with blood. Luckily there were no deaths, and the white she-cat had spent what was left of the dying night by her friend's side in the medicine cat den, pestering Graypetal nonstop. Besides Leopardpaw, the den was full of injured cats, Spottedbee having it the worst. Although he wouldn't admit it, she knew Graypetal was worried about him.

Morning came and she seemed to drown in nerves, but she
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continued to reassure herself that FallClan had the upper paw with SpringClan unsuspecting of another attack. She had to remind herself to stay calm. She worked best that way and she couldn't disappoint her father by having her anxieties weaken her resolve.

Dusk began to settle in, and that's when she heard Sunstar's call from where she lay, curled up by Leopardpaw's makeshift nest.

"Hey D," Leopardpaw rasped, her eyes focusing on the white she-cat, "you have to win, promise me you'll win."

Dawnpaw stared at her, eyes softening as she gently pressed her nose to her friend's.

"I promise."

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Dawnpaw's heart seemed to be drumming constantly. The moon had settled high in the sky, and the white she-cat was walking in tune with her father who requested she stay near him.

The second raid headed east through the pine-oak forest, pale moonlight illuminating their path as they neared the SpringClan border. Each step replaced nerves with purpose, and Dawnpaw was determined to win.

For her clan. For Leopardpaw. For her father.

She walked in silence, switching between listening to Tigertaunt's conversation with Sunstar to focusing on her own thoughts which she tried to organize. She went over every move she had been taught, focusing on the ones that felt the most natural to her.

As they passed through Fishcape and took their first steps into the unfamiliar territory, Dovepaw joined her side, seemingly sharing her newfound confidence.

"I know this is to ensure Ivystar behaves, but to me, it almost feels like vengeance." The calico murmured, glancing up to her.

"To us, I think it is. They took us and held us hostage. It makes me
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feel more powerful to think of it as vengeance." Dawnpaw agreed, because her motivation truly did go farther than simply protecting their land. Truth be told, Fishcape was hardly a thought that crossed her mind.

As the SpringClan camp came into sight, Sunstar paused as he turned to face his clan. Dawnpaw could see the faint hint of fear which clouded his copper eyes as he took the time to look at each of his assembled clanmates, almost as if he was trying to burn each of their faces into his mind. Suddenly, the fear in his eyes transcended into something warmer; a mix of acceptance and gentle pride.

"Today, we fight to protect our home. SpringClan may fight at the loss of their honor, but FallClan will not." The leader began, his voice thick with conviction. "No lives will be taken by FallClan claws. Whatever outcome we are to meet on this night, it will not be an outcome met through the loss of our integrity." He spoke as Brinepaw's rounded blue eyes stared up at his mentor with an unwavering reverence.

Suddenly, the valor in Sunstar's demeanor melted into something almost paternal as his eyes softened.

"I am so proud of each and every one of you, and I have you all to thank for making FallClan what it is. StarClan knows I couldn't have done it on my own." The leader concluded, his eyes briefly locking with Tigertaunt's at the final sentence as the two shared a look of deep understanding. At that, the rest of the assembled cats dipped their heads in respect to their leader.

"In moons after we become one with the stars and the new generations take root, stories about your reign will be told with reverence, Sunstar." Flowerbee spoke. "It is an honor to fight alongside you, and I will forever be proud to have lived in your time."

Sunstar offered the white-gray she-cat a gentle smile as he allowed the moment to settle, though as the clouds moved to cover the moon and the light grew dim, the warmth of the moment was sucked away into the darkness. Dawnpaw remained still, and when

her leader gave a slight flick of his tail to move forward, the air grew intoxicatingly thick.

Dawnpaw followed the leader through the undergrowth, strategically placing her paws where the sound of steps would be minimal. Eventually, they made it to the towering trees which hung over the SpringClan camp.

With a single nod of Sunstar's head, her clan began to gracefully crawl up the trees, finding purchase in the looming branches as she did the same. Once situating herself on one of the hanging branches, her eyes met Dovepaw's, the two sharing a knowing look before nodding to each other in a silent good luck.

Suddenly, everything grew quiet and Dawnpaw almost felt as if time had paused. Not a single zephyr brushed the land and even her heartbeat seemed to go still, until the word they had all been waiting for was called, and it hit her that this was *real*.

"Attack!"

chapter 11

Reality came crashing and it came crashing hard. Dawnpaw seemed frozen in place until she watched as her clanmates bled out of the trees, her heart seeming to burst from her chest until it clicked in her mind. For a few fleeting seconds, she calmed herself, focusing on every critique she had ever received before she swallowed her fear and jumped into the camp.

The silence was a matter of the past as frantic yowls mixed together with screeching cats seemed to scream into her ears alongside her own rushing blood. However Dawnpaw wasn't left to think for long as she felt a cat barreling into her, her eyes blurred by a haze of ginger fur.

The two rolled around desperately, Dawnpaw heaving for air until she was able to swipe her claws against her opponent's face only to be met with Cicadapaw. *I bet you love this,* she thought bitterly before she instantly hurled herself towards the apprentice, watching him intently to analyze any and every movement, and although he attempted to dodge the blow, Dawnpaw was still able to rake her claws against his chest, the feeling of warm liquid staining her white paw. It almost felt ironic how her mother would speak of her pale coat, always saying that white was a color of purity.

Dawnpaw felt anything *but pure.*

Cicadapaw hissed between a mixture of pain and anger, stumbling backwards until he leaped over her, instantly taking the time to get a scratch at her ear. As the pain seared through her body, Dawnpaw felt herself grow equally annoyed, flicking away the dripping blood as she twisted around to face him, the two glaring back at each other.

"Your leader is a fool to challenge Ivystar!" Cicadapaw hissed and Dawnpaw felt herself grow infuriated at his words.

"*Your leader* is a fool for thinking she can go against the rules our

founders clearly set!" She sneered in return, which resulted in Cicadapaw hurling himself towards her. Dawnpaw felt claws dig into her and the next thing she knew, his teeth were sinking into her neck. The white molly felt herself hiss in pain however the hiss quickly turned into whimpers, her eyes squeezing shut as she blindly clawed at his face.

She could feel her fur getting stained which seemed to motivate the molly who forced herself to deal with the pain, her eyes opening with a newfound fury as she sent her claws slashing across his muzzle which resulted in him getting knocked to the side, however she didn't falter. Dawnpaw saw this as the perfect moment to strike again, and she followed in with her thoughts as she leaped onto his back, claws sinking into his shoulders until she felt him fall to the ground with her.

Dawnpaw struggled to her paws as dust clouded her vision, coughing hastily as she glanced around to see the apprentice sprinting away, a satisfied gleam shining within her crystalline gaze.

The diminutive molly took this time to glance around, everywhere she turned filled with fighting cats. She noticed Blossompaw and Meadowlark teaming up against Creamlily, then Harvestleaf and Sunstar at each other's necks before her gaze fell on Dovepaw, the dainty calico fighting against a cat much larger than her. Dawnpaw found herself hurling towards the tomcat's blind side, claws instantly ripping into his shoulder, her blazing gaze meeting Dovepaw's sage depth, the calico offering her a smirk.

The warrior yowled in pain and Dawnpaw felt a piercing pain in her already wounded ear as the warrior slashed at the injured wound, her teeth gritting in pain. She watched as Dovepaw hurled herself to him while he was focused on Dawnpaw, her claws sinking into his muzzle. Dawnpaw watched as the warrior aggressively thrashed his head to dislodge the apprentice, and after a few attempts he was successful, sending Dovepaw tumbling to the ground, blood soaking his muzzle from her attack.

Dawnpaw found herself growing annoyed, about ready to attack until another cat tumbled into her. Dawnpaw was surprised by the

newcomer as she tumbled around with the other cat who seemed to amount to her in size.

The two rolled around until Dawnpaw finally got an upper hand and had the cat pinned, about ready to send a blow down their exposed stomach until her crystalline gaze met a familiar shade of blue.

"Bluepaw?" Dawnpaw murmured, the lithe she-cat beneath her pausing, no longer trying to escape. She seemed just as shocked to see Dawnpaw as Dawnpaw was to see her.

"Dawnpaw?" She murmured, her voice oddly innocent as her previously fiery blue gaze grew round and softened. Dawnpaw was about to let the she-cat go until she noticed Tigertaunt's daunting stare on her and she felt herself grow frozen, gaze frantically shifting between her father's callous gaze and Bluepaw's lively eyes.

Her mind seemed to constantly be at odds with itself and she was always having a mental argument with herself. Beneath her was a she-cat she had grown to respect and see as a friend, not to mention it was Bluepaw who had helped her, but she couldn't let Tigertaunt see her falter, not when she had finally earned his praise.

She hated this, more than anything, as she let her gaze met Bluepaw's own. Dawnpaw's eyes grew apologetic as she stared down at her, her heart seeming to break inside of her chest. *I'm so sorry, Bluepaw.* She thought, her claws raising as she was about to send a blow to the apprentice's cheek until Dawnpaw grew abruptly still, not even noticing Bluepaw escaping as she twisted around.

"No!"

It was Flowerbee, her eyes widened and full of a terror which sent chills down Dawnpaw's back. Only a few mouse-lengths from the warrior lay Sunstar, a wound on his neck which was gushing blood, the putrid smell of copper filling the air. His once lively eyes were completely void as Creamlily stood over his body, and Dawnpaw finally let the realization hit her.

Was Sunstar *dead?*

No, he was fine. *He has several lives left,* she thought, however Dawnpaw was caught off guard as Tigertaunt called the retreat call, watching as her bloodied clan began to withdraw. She quickly followed suit, and on her way out, Dawnpaw glanced behind her shoulder to meet Bluepaw's longing gaze, her heart aching in her chest before she disappeared into the moonlight.

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The walk home was far from cheerful. No one said a word and the silence alone seemed to suffocate her. Lakelily and Frostbird helped carry Sunstar home and Dawnpaw's gaze flickered to meet Brinepaw's eyes, his expression completely desolate. He seemed so defeated.

As they padded into camp, Dawnpaw watched as cats began to surround their returning clanmates, their voices frantic however she felt the terror in their tones shift as they noticed the unmoving Sunstar.

"Sunstar!" Goldenfell hissed as he exited the warriors' den, situating himself before the leader.

"He's going to be okay, right? He has more lives, he's going to wake up, right?" Frozenlily queried frantically, however everyone grew silent as Graypetal nosed his way through the crowd, his expression uncomfortably pained.

"He went into battle knowing he was on his final life, however he only let me know," Graypetal sighed, "Sunstar is *dead*."

Dawnpaw felt herself grow rigid, seeming to fall out of sync with everyone else as she tuned out the screams which erupted into the camp. Sunstar was *dead.* No, no that wasn't right. He couldn't be dead.

However it hit her all over again as Dawnpaw gazed at Meadowlark and Goldenfell, the leader's siblings, sobbing by their brother's side. Her gaze then shifted to Brinepaw, his own blue gaze brimming with tears as he stared at his lifeless mentor.
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Eventually, her crystalline gaze then met cold, lifeless copper eyes, eyes which used to hold such compassion and *life.* Sunstar was dead. Her leader was dead.

Dawnpaw then found herself looking up to Tigertaunt, a sudden shift clicking in her mind as her jaw dropped, something chilling immediately descending within the pale molly as she stared into her father's eyes.

As Tigertaunt stared at Sunstar, his gaze wasn't desolate. He wasn't on the verge of tears. No, it was something much more gruntled.

Tigertaunt seemed *satisfied.*

chapter 12

"The beauty about time is that we're always promised the future and as long as you draw breath, you will hold all the power which will guide you to better days. What happened yesterday does not decide what happens today. I want you to remember that Dawnkit, and I want you to appreciate the beauty of every morning, because every morning we wake up to, is another day where we can turn it around and make it better than before. Dawn is truly such a beautiful thing."

Dawnpaw continued to let Swanflutter's words roam her mind, however no matter how tightly she clung to them, this morning brought her nothing but pain as she stared down at her dead leader.

Sunstar was laying on the ground, eyes now glazed over and fur a mixture of golden brown and matted blood. He was unrecognizable. It made her stomach flip and she struggled to keep her food down at the abhorring sight. Meadowlark and Goldenfell hadn't left his side since they had returned from the battle, their eyes red-stained and completely void. They seemed so numb.

Dawnpaw's mind was all over the place because simply, she found it too painful to focus on one thing.

She couldn't clear Bluepaw's widened cerulean eyes from her thoughts, the death of her leader or the unsettling stare which remained in Tigertaunt's slanted gaze.

The sky was spotless and soft gales soared throughout the camp, the gentle whistling of morning birdsong traveling into her ears. The day felt far too beautiful despite the dour mood of her clan.

She was forced to visit Graypetal by her mother, and she just sat in silence as her former mentor patched up her wounds, however she wasn't sure what to say. She was sure Graypetal didn't have anything to say, either.

One of Silverpool's kits, Hiddenkit, was by his side. It seemed to

lighten her mood a little and she was glad the medicine cat had set his eyes on someone more qualified to be his apprentice.

Somewhere along the way Dawnpaw had fallen asleep, and it seemed to be a gift from StarClan that her dreams were pleasant.

Maybe she was already dreaming. Maybe she'd wake up and Sunstar would still be alive.

She wasn't dreaming.

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Rounded blue eyes fluttered open to meet a soft shade of green accompanied by a rather eager calico.

"Come on sleepyhead, you've been out all day." Dovepaw spoke softly, and Dawnpaw felt her body shiver as the other apprentice nudged her cheek before groaning in annoyance and sitting up to groom her matted fur, sending the mottled she-cat a death glare for waking her up in the process before she finally spoke.

"Tell me I was dreaming," Dawnpaw sighed, "tell me Sunstar is okay."

Dovepaw grew uncomfortably quiet, the excitement vanishing from her gaze as she shook her head. *Then why is she so excited?*

"While you were asleep, Frozenlily finally managed to get Goldenfell and Meadowlark away from Sunstar so he could be prepared. You missed the vigil too, but tonight is really important." Dovepaw explained, her voice quiet but it was obvious she was struggling to hide her excitement.

"What's so important?"

"Your dad just arrived from Hallowed Cavern with Graypetal, he's officially FallClan's leader."

"Already?" Dawnpaw spoke, her jaw gapped as she stared at her newfound friend who only nodded solemnly.
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"But not just that," Dovepaw started again, her green gaze bright, "the clan feels like it's in ruins so when Tigerstar elects his deputy tonight, he's decided to move our warrior ceremony a little earlier in an attempt to give cats hope."

Dovepaw then paused again, sage gaze shining brilliantly.

"Dawnpaw, *we're becoming warriors."*

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Dawnpaw almost felt selfish for the excitement she was feeling, her mind constantly apologizing to Sunstar for being so tactless.

The white she-cat was situated at the bottom of the Highledge where Tigertaunt— now Tigerstar— stood. While her mother relentlessly lapped at her fur, she watched as her friends became warriors.

Tealpool, Blossomfall and Doveflutter.

Tigerstar then called upon Hiddenkit and Fernkit, the two kits padding up eagerly with lopsided grins. Fernpaw was then appointed to Duskfur and as she had guessed, Hiddenpaw became the new medicine cat apprentice under Graypetal.

"I try not to be biased, but these next two have made me extremely proud; not only as a mentor, but as a father as well. Brinepaw, Dawnpaw, please step forward."

Dawnpaw felt everything in her rush, her nerves seeming to suffocate her in the best way possible as she glanced back to Swanflutter who gave her an encouraging smile. The pale she-cat then made her way towards her father with Brinepaw, who despite the circumstances, seemed excited too.

"I, Tigerstar, leader of FallClan, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on this apprentice. They have trained hard to understand the ways of your noble code, and I commend them to you as a warrior in their turn," Tigerstar spoke as he then stared down at the pale bengal, "Brinepaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend your clan, even at the cost of your life?
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"I do."

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior name. Brinepaw, from this moment on you will be known as Brinebloom. StarClan honors your loyalty and chivalry, and we welcome you as a full warrior of FallClan," Tigerstar spoke, pride swelling in his gaze as he touched his son's nose, "Sunstar would be proud of you." He whispered, which Brinebloom nodded to before stepping back.

"I, Tigerstar, leader of FallClan, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on this apprentice. They have trained hard to understand the ways of your noble code, and I commend them to you as a warrior in their turn," the newly-announced leader spoke as his gaze fell upon her, "Dawnpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend your clan, even at the cost of your life?

"I do." It took everything in her to remain calm, but she succeeded nonetheless.

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior name. Dawnpaw, from this moment on you will be known as Dawncurl. StarClan honors your strength and composure, and we welcome you as a full warrior of FallClan." Her father spoke and as they touched noses, Dawncurl felt something in her click. She wasn't sure what it was, but she felt oddly empowered.

As she padded down to the assembled cats below her, she was immediately swarmed by her mother who embraced her instantly, and Dawncurl felt like a kit all over again.

"I'm so incredibly proud of you both." Swanflutter purred as she looked at both of her kits, green gaze soft as ever, however they almost seemed desolate as well. Dawncurl didn't question it.

"I need you guys to make me a promise." The light gray she-cat spoke, her voice rushed as Tigerstar still hadn't called the meeting off. Brinebloom and Dawncurl looked at each other briefly before looking back to Swanflutter.

"I want you guys to live life to the fullest," Swanflutter spoke with

upmost feeling, "it may sound cheesy, but just know that I will love you both forever so I need you to both promise me you'll experience everything life has to offer you."

Dawncurl found her mother's words odd, but the two siblings murmured their promises before embracing Swanflutter once last time before Tigerstar spoke up.

"Before I call this meeting off, there is one more final announcement to be made. As I've succeeded Sunstar, we are left without a deputy."

The murmuring clan fell quiet, their eyes instantly falling on the leader before them before he spoke again.

"I say these words before StarClan, so that the spirits of our warrior ancestors may hear and approve of my choice. The new deputy of FallClan is Flowerbee."

The mottled gray-white she-cat grew quiet, her gaze soon shining brilliantly in the light as her clanmates congratulated the new deputy. Lakelily and Hawkhowl both seemed annoyed, however the rest of the clan seemed to approve of the choice. Flowerbee was already heavily respected by the clan, so Dawncurl wasn't shocked by her father's choice.

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"I bet I'll beat you!"

"In your dreams!" Dawncurl purred as she kicked off her hind legs, the forest passing her in the blur.

Doveflutter had been the one to greet her as she woke up from her first night in the warriors' den, wanting to take her first steps outside of camp with the white-cat and Dawncurl was happy to tag along.

The calico had challenged her to a race, which Dawncurl stubbornly accepted despite knowing the other warrior was annoyingly fast. She didn't mind, though. Even if Doveflutter was beating her by an *embarrassing* amount, she relished in the first time she was out as a
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fully fledged warrior.

As she reached their end marking, she was instantly being taunted by a gloating Doveflutter, however lightheartedly.

"I just beat *miss prodigy* over here by six mouse-lengths! Dawncurl, what do you have to say about yourself?"

"That you're still egotistical as always." Dawncurl smirked, however she didn't miss the challenging grin which crossed her friend's face and the next thing she knew, Doveflutter bad playfully leapt on top of her, the two rolling down a small hill before Doveflutter managed to have her pinned, sage gaze smug as she grinned down at her.

"You made that too easy."

"Just decided to be nice and let you win, no need to thank me. You're already welcome." Dawncurl purred, her whiskers twitching with amusement before Doveflutter rolled her eyes and got off of her. The two then padded over to a small ledge which overlooked the mountainside, both sitting in a comfortable silence before Doveflutter spoke up.

"How big do you think the world is?"

Dawncurl just looked at her, however the calico didn't meet her gaze. Instead she continued to gaze out into the vast expanse, and Dawncurl felt something in her flutter.

"I don't know. Big." She shrugged before looking out as well, her tail wrapping around her paws.

"Do you ever wonder, even for just a second, what all could be out there? All the different cultures that exist? All the beautiful places to visit?" Doveflutter spoke, her tone growing continuously gentle.

"It crosses my mind sometimes," Dawncurl sighed, "but my loyalty will always remain with FallClan."

"Yeah, mine too." Doveflutter spoke again as another silence swallowed the two, but yet again, it wasn't overbearing. Dawncurl

hated silence, it made her uncomfortable, but with Doveflutter, she felt at ease. Simply being in her presence was enough.

"Have you forgiven me yet?"

Dawncurl flicked an ear as she glanced at the calico, her head tilting until Doveflutter's sage gaze finally met her own, and Dawncurl just smiled at her.

"If I didn't forgive you, I wouldn't be here with you right now."

However the two were interrupted as gentle foliage rustled in their ears, and the two warriors were met by a familiar golden molly.

Leopardpaw.

"See it didn't take you long to replace me, and with *her."* The bengal hissed, deep amber gaze rounded with pain and hate. Doveflutter shuffled nervously as she glanced between the both of them.

"I'm gonna," she paused awkwardly, "let you two talk."

As Doveflutter disappeared into the brush, Dawncurl sent her friend a questioning glare.

"Don't play dumb Dawnpa- Dawncurl, she tormented you since you were little and it was me who always defended you, even when she had you sobbing. Now here you are, being total best friends with the enemy."

Dawncurl just stared at her in bewilderment before she shook her head.

"Leopardpaw, she isn't the enemy. She's one of our clanmates and the petty kit drama needs to end. She's sorry, she's proven it countless times."

"But what about me?" Leopardpaw hissed, however Dawncurl heard the strain in her voice. "How could you replace me with her?"

"I never replaced you, you're my best friend." Dawncurl spoke softly as she nudged her friend's cheek, but Leopardpaw only swatted her

away.

"No," she snickered, "you're a fancy little warrior now, and you've forgotten about the rest of us."

"Leo-"

"Don't call me that," Leopardpaw interrupted, "just listen here Dawncurl, when she hurts you— *and she will*— don't you dare coming crawling back to me."

Dawncurl didn't get to respond before Leopardpaw vanished, however the bengal's final sentence only peeved her off. *I did nothing wrong,* she thought, her ear flicking in frustration as she made her way home.

However Dawncurl's frustrations instantly vanished as she entered her clan's camp only to be met by a frenzy. She noticed most of the clan surrounding something and she slowly made her way over only to be met by an anxious Blossomfall who stood in her way.

"Dawncurl," she murmured, "you're not going to want to see this."

Dawncurl met the sable warrior's icy depth for a few longing seconds before she pushed past her and the other gathered cats, her gaze instantly looking down to see light gray fur curled up, however she swiftly noticed the distorted angle of the cat's neck and the x-shaped wound which laced the light gray coat.

It may sound cheesy, but just know that I will love you both forever so I need you to both promise me you'll experience everything life has to offer you.

The words kept replaying in her head as the realization finally dawned on her and Dawncurl felt her muscles grow rigid, her blue gaze growing dizzy and disoriented as she stared down at the dead she-cat.

Her mother was dead.

Not just dead, Swanflutter was *murdered.*

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Been in a bit of a writer's block recently so this chapter probably wasn't as good as others! Also, before I began writing this, I already had everyone's warrior name picked out and I completely forgot there was a canon Blossomfall. I thought about changing it, but ultimately went against it because she's not that prominent in the canon books. <3

When I say things get messy from here, they do. Also noticed someone mention they weren't quite sure who the villain is, but something great about a morally gray area is there are no true villains. However, the main antagonist in this story has been introduced. Everything will make sense in the end, I promise. ;)

However, the "villain" in this fic can also be completely subjective! I wrote the story to be like that. c:

chapter 13

Change. To make something different; alter or modify. *Change can be good,* Swanflutter always preached.

Change was not good. Dawncurl spent the entire night curled up beside her mother's stiffening body, nose pressed into fur which had brought her nothing but comfort. It was a feeling so unwelcoming and foreign. It was worse than any kind of physical pain.

She could feel her heart breaking; metaphorically. Dawncurl was desolate. She was confused. She couldn't process her thoughts which used to line up in her mind perfectly. She felt out of control, and that *terrified* her.

Whenever Doveflutter tried to comfort her, she only dismissed her with insolent hisses, and it eventually took Flowerbee having to physically pull Dawncurl away, saying that her mother's body was decaying and apparently the foul scent was disturbing the clan.

Her vigil was held, but Dawncurl didn't go despite Brinebloom's pleas. It was the first time he had talked to her in many days, but she couldn't really bring herself to care. It made no sense.

Swanflutter was *murdered.* Was it SpringClan?

No, that made no sense. FallClan had been defeated and to their dismal, Fishcape officially belonged to SpringClan. What else could Ivystar want? She already won. Surely the brindled molly wasn't that cruel.

Then Dawncurl thought of her mother's final words to her.

It may sound cheesy, but just know that I will love you both forever so I need you to both promise me you'll experience everything life has to offer you.

It almost sounded like a goodbye, as if Swanflutter already knew

what was going to happen. How could that be? How could her mother know she was going to be murdered in advance?

Dawncurl spent days in solitude, barely eating the prey Doveflutter and her brother were leaving her. Every time they tried to comfort her, she would dismiss them with hostility. She knew in her mind she was being unfair. She knew that she was being unnecessarily harsh. After all, Brinebloom had lost his mom too.

It wasn't until she was greeted by Tigerstar who scolded her for being *weak,* making sure to inform her that she was being dramatic.

"*I lost my mate and you don't see me sulking. Suck it up, you have duties and responsibilities. I finally see the potential in you and you're already disappointing me. Do better."*

She duly noted it.

Sometimes Creekwillow and Sagefrost would visit her, telling her all their stories and experiences with grief and how to overcome it, however she ignored them until the elders finally left her alone.

She was growing fragile, she could feel herself getting dizzy and sick.

Until one night, something in her mind just *clicked.* Dawncurl's dulled gaze skimmed over her sleeping clan until she softly padded between them to be engulfed with a gelid breeze, her gaze settling on a fresh layer of snowfall. She shivered for a few fleeting moments until warily padded towards the fresh-kill pile and grabbing a rabbit. She settled in a small patch of undergrowth where she indulged in the prey, hoping it would make her feel better, instead it only made her more sick, though the pale she-cat forced herself to eat it anyways.

After that she had managed to fall back into her life, but it was more of a routine. Sleep, wake up, go on patrols, ignore her friends, eat and then sleep again. She liked routine, it promised her order.

Leopardpaw, Lionpaw and Nightpaw were then made into warriors, adorning the new names of Leopardlune, Lionglare and Nightglow.

However Dawncurl didn't congratulate the trio, holding on desperately to a personal grudge.

She wasn't sure if she was mad at Leopardlune's prior outburst, or the bengal's lack of compassion during the death of Dawncurl's literal mother.

Dawncurl slowly let Doveflutter back into her life, only spending time with the calico. Brinebloom seemed keen on rebuilding their relationship, but she wanted no part in it. It wasn't his fault, but she knew that conversations of her mother would be brought up, and she wasn't ready to talk about it.

Whenever she wasn't doing her warrior duties, Dawncurl seemed to spend every moment with the calico. Doveflutter, to her utter shock, was probably one of the best cats she knew. She wasn't sure what sparked her past hostility, but Doveflutter's loathe was just that; something in the past.

However it wasn't just her own personal dynamics which were changing. Ever since her father's reign, her clan seemed to fall into a divide. She apparently wasn't the only one to notice her dad's look of approval by the death of Sunstar, or his lack of emotion to the death of his own mate.

However it was something else which sent shivers down Dawncurl's spine as she overheard a conversation between Cypressfall and Southlight.

"Ever since Swanflutter got with that tomcat, I always got a horrible feeling." Southlight had murmured, her ears pinned uncomfortably low as Cypressfall nodded her agreement.

"I can't almost help but feel as though," Cypressfall paused, her voice full of uncertainty as Southlight pressured her to continue, "as though he may have had a part in it."

"A part in what?"

"I don't know," Cypressfall murmured, "Swanflutter's death." She spoke, her voice borderline fragile.

"Tigerstar may be cold, but he would never do such a thing." Southlight spoke, however her voice didn't seem defensive. In fact, it seemed unsure.

"I heard some gossiping going around, some even claimed they saw gray fur between his claws the morning of her death. But those were just rumors." Cypressfall spoke quietly as she placed her head between her paws.

"Accusations like that could be really big," Southlight spoke cautiously, "some might even try to rebel."

"It's just a conspiracy, but I can't help but feel like something really bad is going to happen." Cypressfall replied, and that was all Dawncurl cared to hear.

She knew what she had to do.

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"Excuse me? What?"

"Rumors are spreading through camp, very threatening conspiracies," Dawncurl paused hesitantly, "ones that could be detrimental to your rank."

Tigerstar's eyes fell into callous slits and Dawncurl felt her heart beating rapidly against her chest as a chilling silence filled the intoxicating air.

"Who is spreading these lies?" The bengal sneered, ivory teeth glistening in the moonlight.

"I'm not sure, but they *are* spreading. Cats are growing wary, father," she paused cautiously, "but I'd be willing to bet it's someone who is bitter about your choice in deputy."

"I see." Tigerstar spoke, and she desperately tried to read his void gaze however it was completely blank. It wasn't until he spoke again that Dawncurl froze.

"How do you think we should go about solving this?" His words
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were unyielding however it was the nearly challenging gleam which lurked beneath his gaze which made Dawncurl shiver.

She thought for a few fleeting moments until an idea crossed her mind, one that instantly made a pit form in her stomach. It was foul, maybe even borderline vile.

Dawncurl stared at him momentarily, pale blue eyes burning into a deeper depth.

"Hawkhowl has a bad reputation throughout the clan." The words fell from her mouth, a part of her screaming that this was *wrong.*

However a part much bigger, much more desperate for praise, took the lead as words just fell like word vomit.

"It would be our word against his."

"What are you implying?" Tigerstar nearly hummed, however she couldn't shake the smug gleam within his gaze.

"We blame her death on him, saying I saw it with my own eyes. It would clear your name, Hawkhowl is exiled and all is good in the world again."

Tigerstar's jaw twisted into a sickening grin, one which made Dawncurl utterly nauseous.

"You continue to amaze me every day, Dawncurl," The leader paused, "what do we say when the clan questions why we're only now speaking up on this?"

"We say that I physically wasn't in the right mindset to let something that big into the world, half the clan already pities me anyways."

"How do we make them believe?" Tigerstar then queried and Dawncurl fell quiet for a few fleeting moments until she met her father's gaze.

"I'll make them believe."

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"Cats of FallClan, gather below the Highledge for a clan meeting!"

Dawncurl watched as her clan gathered below the ledge, eyes drowsy with sleep as morning light colored them in a vermilion hue. Her heart was pounding, but she was able to swallow her hesitance. She couldn't screw this up.

"What could this possibly be about?" She heard Lakelily grumble from where he sat beside Hawkhowl and she had to force her food to stay in her stomach.

"Before what's about to be said is said, I ask that you all *remain calm.* You can't fall into chaos." Tigerstar spoke, his tone unusually soft, until he motioned for Dawncurl to step forward.

As she took his place, her gaze instantly met Doveflutter's questioning sage gaze, then Brimebloom's equally confused stare, as she forced tears to brim her waterline.

"I've been off," she started slowly as she dropped her shoulders, her voice delicate and strained as she stared down at the clan, "my mother's death shattered me, it did, though there is more to it."

Quiet murmurs fell between the clan, some confused, while others stared up at her with sympathetic eyes.

"I miss her so much," Dawncurl spoke, her voice breaking at the end as she forced the tears to slowly fall from her eyes, "and that is why I must be honest with you all. I should've said this earlier, but the words couldn't leave my mouth. I think I was in shock, really. Maybe even denial." She continued to speak, almost shocking herself at how *easily* the lies fell from her mouth and how *easily* she made herself appear weak and fragile. It was almost addicting.

"My mom was murdered, we all know this. It was cruel. It was inhumane. It was *sick.* The way he lured her to Willow's Edge, spitting out how *he* deserved to be deputy."

The clan fell into gasps, eyes wide and frantic as they all gazed at each other until looking back to her.
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"Dawncurl, what in StarClan's name are you talking about?" Frozenlily murmured.

"He said Tigerstar was a fool for choosing Flowerbee, that she wasn't worthy, that it should've been him. He said," Dawncurl paused, forcing out a choked up cry as she met her dad's solemn gaze then looked back to her clan, "he said that Tigerstar would pay."

"Dawncurl," Flowerbee spoke cautiously, "who killed Swanflutter?"

Dawncurl fell quiet, unable to meet Hawkhowl's gaze. Her heart was beating rapidly, but despite it all, her mind was clear.

It was so unbelievably clear.

"Hawkhowl," she paused, "Hawkhowl killed my mother."

The clan completely dismissed her father's plea for peace and composure as they fell into an uproar of screams and yowls.

"This is an outrage!" Hawkhowl hissed, however Dawncurl cringed at the desperation in his voice as he looked around frantically before his gaze met her's, and she felt something chilling drown her.

"You fox-hearted moron, you speak *revolting* lies and you know it." The words were full of such fierce enmity however Dawncurl didn't waver under his deathly glare. Somehow, it gave her more power.

"I speak nothing but the *truth* as you took an innocent life away, out of *bloodthirsty motives."* Dawncurl sneered, the lies falling so easily from her mouth.

"A disgrace!" Frostbird hissed, her blue gaze enraged as others yowled agreement. Her clan seemed nearly feral.

"We should kill him in the same way Swanflutter was murdered, or worse! He should *pay!"* Sagefrost sneered.

"I say we banish him from our lands, offer him a fate worse than death." Spottedbee growled.

"No, no! She's lying to you all!" Hawkhowl's vicious tone instantly fell into desperate pleas, his gaze wide and frantic. Dawncurl had never seen the tomcat so vulnerable before.

"Lakelily, you have to believe me. You believe me, right?" Hawkhowl's voice turned into rushed whispers as his gaze burned into the other tom beside him, though Lakelily seemed unsure for a few moments before shaking his head.

"Exile." Lakelily muttered, Hawkhowl's eyes instantly rounding in surprise and terror as the clan started chanting the word over and over.

"Silence!" Tigerstar then hissed, the clan falling into complete stillness as they glared up at their leader.

"Hawkhowl, for your crimes, you have been sentenced to exile. If we see you *anywhere* near our lands," Tigerstar paused as a frightening silence filled the air,

"we will *kill you."*

chapter 14

It had been half a moon since Hawkhowl's exile and things were slowly falling back together. Tigerstar's demeanor had completely changed into something much more mellow, however Dawncurl wasn't stupid. She knew her father's act was just that; an act. He couldn't risk another stain on his reputation.

Frostbird's kits were also apprenticed and in her favor, Dawncurl was chosen as a mentor. Truth be told, she wasn't surprised. She had been sticking close with her father and he seemed to rely on her more than his own deputy, however Flowerbee never complained.

Risingpaw was her apprentice's name. She was a pale cream she-cat with green eyes, and she carried a relatively strong personality. Either way, Dawncurl was satisfied.

To be honest, life carried on and Dawncurl wasn't as guilty about lying as she thought she'd be. She ruined a cat's life, yet she continued on with her own. It almost gave her closure with her mother's death.

In a way, it was almost empowering how easily her clan believed her words without a single doubt and she honestly felt worse about her lack of empathy for the situation then the actual situation itself.

The worst part was, Dawncurl wasn't even entirely sure her father was innocent.

But she knew Hawkhowl was.

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"Redpaw is respectful. I think he'll make a great warrior." Doveflutter spoke as she walked side-by-side with Dawncurl, sage eyes staring ahead of her.
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"I agree," she spoke, "definitely the most responsible out of his littermates. Risingpaw is fierce, though."

"She reminds me of you." Doveflutter chuckled and Dawncurl sent her a playful eye roll.

"In your defense, it's a good thing." The calico prompted and the two made brief eye contact.

"How so?"

"You guys have your similarities, and some of my favorite traits in her, are in you." Doveflutter shrugged, and Dawncurl flicked her ear as she felt her cheeks instantly flush with warmth.

"Didn't know you thought so highly of me." Dawncurl mused as she sent her friend a playful smirk and Doveflutter just rolled her eyes.

"Don't get too cocky now." She spoke.

The two warriors spent the rest of the evening together and it brought Dawncurl a wave of nostalgia of her childhood. If she had told her younger self that she'd become so close with her nemesis, she would've flat out refused it.

As nightfall settled in, Doveflutter had brought Dawncurl to a little cavern where the moonlight was able to shine through, making the hanging icicles glimmer.

"This is pretty. When'd you find it?" Dawncurl queried, meeting dim sage eyes.

"I don't know, I just did." Doveflutter shrugged, however she offered her friend a faint grin. "You're the first cat I showed, though."

"Really?" Dawncurl smirked. "Careful Doveflutter, your inner fan is jumping out."

"Shut up." The calico groaned as she nudged her friend away, resulting in them both laughing in response.

The two had agreed to spend the night inside the cavern, and

Dawncurl was in no mood to retort. Besides, the walk home would've been long and she was tired. She had settled down a few mouse-lengths from the calico who she supposed fell asleep until a gentle voice spoke up.

"I'm cold."

Dawncurl froze, blue eyes fluttering up to meet soft green eyes, however she didn't say anything. She didn't need to. With hesitance, she slowly approached the mottled molly and settled beside her, their fur brushing as she laid down. She felt awkward at first, and the two just shared a shaky laugh but it didn't take long for her to feel comfortable.

As Doveflutter's breathing slowed and the calico fell into slumber, Dawncurl just stared at her and she was filled with butterflies. It was a feeling which brought her excitement, one that she had been tucking deep into her mind for so long.

She cared about her in a way that was foreign to her, and she wasn't *exactly* sure what it was, but she knew Doveflutter was special.

Maybe it was her mannerisms, or the way she grew fidgety whenever she was nervous. Maybe it was the way her sage eyes rounded whenever she was listening to you talk and Dawncurl always found herself getting lost in them. Maybe it was the history they shared, the whole love-hate thing. Dawncurl wasn't entirely sure, however she did know one thing; Doveflutter was there, and in that moment, that was enough.

In that moment, that was all she needed.

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"That was so boring," Risingpaw muttered as she followed Dawncurl back to camp, "I couldn't care less about learning the warrior code."

"You're supposed to live by that code. Without it, you aren't a true warrior." Dawncurl explained as she met her apprentice's green eyes.
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"Being a warrior means being brave and strong! Not learning about stupid rules all day."

"And who told you that?" Dawncurl queried.

"You."

"Oh," Dawncurl paused, "well I meant that's a big part to it."

As they entered camp, Dawncurl sent (more like forced) the fiery apprentice to fetch food for the elders until she was met by a familiar pale she-cat.

Leopardlune.

"Hey." The warrior murmured, her eyes not meeting Dawncurl's once.

"Hey you." Dawncurl spoke, her voice light as she stared at her former friend.

"Can we maybe talk?" She murmured, amber eyes still fixated on her paws.

Dawncurl was quiet for a few moments before finally caving and letting the other she-cat lead her out of camp, the two walking in complete silence until Leopardlune paused and finally met her gaze.

They just stared at each other and Dawncurl held her gaze harshly, annoyed that she was wasting time, until she finally spoke.

"Okay, it was petty and stupid and I was being overly jealous and possessive. I didn't think we'd be in it for this long but then your mom died and everything with Hawkhowl happened and I didn't know how to deal with it or how to comfort you." Leopardlune just started venting, rushing over her words as her paws shuffled beneath her anxiously.

"The reason I didn't talk to you wasn't because I was still mad, but more so I didn't really know what to say," Leopardlune sighed, "ever since Swanflutter's death, I wanted to talk to you. I *wanted* to be there for you. It's not really a you thing, it's a me thing. I suck at

comforting people." Leopardlune ranted, a nervous laugh leaving her jaws as her unsure gaze met Dawncurl's blue eyes.

The two held each other's gaze for a few moments before Leopardlune spoke again.

"I miss you, D. You're my best friend and I need you in my life," she paused, "and I'm sorry."

Dawncurl stared at her, and she felt another wave of nostalgia hit her and a brief montage of memories with the other molly flashed before her eyes. After keeping her waiting for several painfully long seconds, a sheepish grin crossed Dawncurl's face which resulted in a relieved smile from her friend.

"I guess I missed you too."

"Oh don't flatter yourself, you totally did. I'm the best cat ever." Leopardlune hummed in a singsong tone, however her eyes shone much more confidently than before.

"Look who's flattering themself now." Dawncurl mused, however her eyes were nothing but playful.

"Just being honest." Leopardlune smirked as she started walking, flickering her tail in motion for Dawncurl to follow. The white she-cat didn't hesitate as she matched her steps with the bengal.

"So," Dawncurl started, "how have you been? Any exciting news I've missed out on?"

"Nothing much. I've been hanging out with your brother a lot, he's not as hardcore when you get to know him," she paused before looking back to her friend, "but I guess you knew that."

"Not really," Dawncurl sighed, "me and him aren't that close."

"Right," she paused awkwardly, "anyways, what's been up with you?"

Dawncurl was quiet for a moment. *Honestly, a lot has been up,* she thought.

"I have an apprentice, her name is Risingpaw."

"Frostbird's daughter, right?"

"Yeah, I've been pretty busy with her. She's," Dawncurl paused briefly, "definitely something." She mused, Leopardlune laughing in turn.

They were quiet for awhile after that, though Dawncurl was caught completely off guard by her friend's next query.

"So, what's up between you and Doveflutter?"

Dawncurl felt her body go stiff at the question, another set of butterflies erupting in her stomach as she met her friend's knowing gaze.

"Nothing."

"You're such a bad liar," Leopardlune giggled, "D, I'm not stupid."

"You sure about that?" She deadpanned.

"Positive." Leopardlune hummed, however her narrowed gaze didn't falter and Dawncurl was forced to actually think about the question she had been avoiding herself.

What *was* going on between her and the brazen calico? They were friends, right? What else could they be? It made Dawncurl's head hurt. However the more she thought about it, the more she realized her friendship with Doveflutter was much more different than her friendship with Leopardlune. In a way, she found herself much more intimate with the calico and oddly, much more vulnerable.

Doveflutter was compelling; addicting even. Thinking on it deeper, Dawncurl found herself mesmerized by her every move and the butterflies which fluttered around in her stomach while in her presence. Even any mention of her name made Dawncurl enlivened.

Then she thought of how protective she grew over her, even while the two were at odds. She remembered their escape from SpringClan and how defensive she got over her when Creamlily had

her pinned. That protective nature of Dawncurl only seemed to grow since then.

Doveflutter became apart of her routine and she had grown to be her only constant.

"I think I'm in love with her."

The words just slipped from her mouth and for a second she wasn't sure she even said it, but the shocked look on Leopardlune's face was enough to add to her own horror.

"I-" Leopardlune was interrupted.

"I didn't mean to say that." Dawncurl muttered, her voice apathetic.

"But you did." Leopardlune spoke blankly, however Dawncurl was confused as a smirk crossed her friend's face.

"Don't get so smug about it." She muttered.

"Do you think she feels the same?" Leopardlune then queried, however the question was something Dawncurl wasn't really interested to know. She wasn't sure she could handle the answer.

"Probably not."

"Oh come on, she's been all over you," Leopardlune gushed, her eyes sparkling as she continued, "she literally followed you like a lost puppy ever since you two came home from SpringClan."

"Lost puppy?"

"A saying I heard someone say once, stop changing the subject," Leopardlune rolled her eyes, "my point is, I think she's felt the same long before you have."

"You really think so?"

"I *know so,* and I'm going to be your wingman." Leopardlune boasted.

"I can't think of anything worse."

"I'm actually quite qualified for the job, thank you very much." Leopardlune retorted, however it resulted in the two just giggling.

"StarClan I forgot how annoying and excessive you were." Dawncurl groaned.

"And I forgot how subtle and obscure you were." Leopardlune retorted in turn, Dawncurl choking out a dry laugh in turn.

"I've missed you so much, Leo."

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Another layer of snowfall covered the ground in a gelid white blanket which glistened in the cascading moonlight, illuminating her path as she padded through.

Dawncurl was nervous for lack of better words as she padded through the slope, Doveflutter's hot breath on her heels. She felt naive almost and with every step she could feel her body catching on fire.

What if Doveflutter didn't feel the same? What if she was jeopardizing their friendship? What if she was ruining one of the best things in her life?

Eventually, they made it to the cavern Doveflutter had brought her to before, but to Doveflutter's utter shock, the den was covered in lotuses and water hyacinths, which were the only flowers her and Leopardlune were able to find during leaf-bare.

"Dawncurl," Doveflutter exhaled, her sage eyes rounded in warmth as her gaze scanned the den which was irradiated by the moonlight, "it's beautiful."

"Yeah, that's the point." She mused, trying to make herself more confident with humor. It didn't work.

"What's the occasion?"
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"Um," Dawncurl could feel herself getting all choked up as she finally stood in front of the brindled molly and met her laurel stare, "that's a very good question."

"You're so awkward." Doveflutter mused.

"I am *not."* Dawncurl retorted.

"Are too."

"Am not."

"Are too."

"I love you."

Dawncurl felt everything in her still and for a second, she could swear her heart had completely stalled. She forced herself to keep her gaze on the calico, desperately reading the shimmering sage depth ahead of her.

"Dawncurl-"

"I'm *in love* with you, Doveflutter. I don't know how or when it happened but I know my feelings are real," she paused, her body seeming to completely fall into panic mode, "you are one of the few things I'm wholeheartedly sure of."

If Dawncurl's heart was stalled before, it definitely wasn't now. She was terrified Doveflutter could hear the relentless drumming inside her chest.

"Everything about you captivates me and I can't keep forcing the feelings away. I'm not strong enough to push away something this *intense,"* Dawncurl paused as she felt herself jumbling her words, "it sounds sappy and I know I'm going to regret this in the morning, but right now, I regret nothing. I love you, and I've never been more sure of something in my life."

Silence.

It was nearly intoxicating and Dawncurl felt the need to hold her

breath. This was the most vulnerable she had ever made herself and she hated it. She hated being vulnerable. She hated being unsure. She hated her lack of control in the situation.

"I thought," Doveflutter paused, her words shaky yet comfortingly thrilling, "I thought it was just me."

"Are you saying what I think you're saying?" Dawncurl queried, her crystalline gaze nearly pleading before Doveflutter released a buoyant laugh as she instantly embraced her and Dawncurl felt her body instantly melt into the calico's soft coat.

"I love you too."

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MY BEST GIRLIES! Okay so this was supposed to be another plot-filled chapter which helped move the story along, but so far these last few chapters have been that so I decided to delve more into personal relationships so I could write a much more fleshed out and decent love confession, and mend Dawncurl's relationship with Leo.

I hope you guys enjoyed regardless! The next chapter will be falling back into the chaos of it all. Either way, any and all feedback is appreciated. ＜3

chapter 15

"Seasons have the force to change our moods. Our lives. Our prospectives. There are some things we are in control of, but one thing we have no control over is change. The seasons teach us this."

"What does this have to do with anything?" Risingpaw muttered as she stared at Dawncurl with bored almond-shaped eyes.

"Because the gathering is in a few days and I'm already guaranteed a spot. That means you're going too, so you have to understand the symbolism behind our ways and the clans' culture."

"Wait," Risingpaw grinned, "I'm going to the gathering?"

"Out of everything I've said, that's all you managed to pick up?" Dawncurl sighed.

"Yeah?" She questioned but Dawncurl ignored her frustration with the apprentice and continued speaking.

"Our clans are named after the seasons. SpringClan represents new beginnings, the revival of new life and prosperity. SummerClan represents extravagance and youth and they're known as the calm before a storm. We symbolize the harvest of maturity, change and preservation. Lastly, WinterClan depicts isolation and ironically enough, warmth. Though they are known to start in turmoil, they also represent the light at the end of a tunnel that shows anything is possible."

"Interesting." Risingpaw spoke, however Dawncurl easily detected the condescending tone which laced her voice.

"That's all you need to know for now, come on before we're late for the group training." Dawncurl sighed as she motioned for her apprentice to follow.

Eventually they made it to Needle Point where Flowerbee had

conducted a group training session for all the apprentices, and Dawncurl felt her irritation instantly vanish as her eyes met a familiar shade of green.

Doveflutter; her *mate.* They never really asked the official question, but they didn't need to. Their feelings were clear, and that's all the assurance they needed.

"Hey you." The calico purred as she nosed her neck in greeting, Dawncurl purring in turn.

"Okay lovebirds, save it for later." Flowerbee playfully mocked which resulted in Doveflutter whispering an embarrassed apology to her former mentor.

"Okay, I'm separating you all into two groups. The hunting group and the fighting group." The deputy began. She waited for a few moments before continuing, "the fighting group will be Duskfur, Fernpaw, Doveflutter and Redpaw. You other six will be the hunting group. I'll be evaluating both of the lessons, and adding in any critiques necessary." Flowerbee explained as she offered the assembled cats a faint smile before sending them off.

Dawncurl stared at her apprentice then to Nightglow and Tealpool who stood with their own apprentices, Shadepaw and Oceanpaw.

"Let's get started, I suppose." Nightglow shrugged.

The rest of the lesson resulted in teaching the apprentices different techniques then testing them, and Dawncurl easily noticed that her own apprentice seemed to excel best in hunting rather than combat. It was a long day, but Flowerbee finally dismissed the group when dusk began to approach.

The days leading up to the gathering were slow and Dawncurl could not be any more apprehensive. Although her father hadn't informed her of any new game plan to take Fishcape back, she knew that whatever was waiting for them wouldn't be very pretty.

As she had assumed, she was chosen to go along with her apprentice, Doveflutter, Lionglare and a few others. As nightfall

settled, they set on the trip to WinterClan who would be hosting the season's gathering. Since departing late, they were the final clan to arrive and Dawncurl instantly spotted the familiar gray pelt of Bluepaw, however she either failed to recognize her or the SpringClan molly was blatantly ignoring her on purpose.

"We apologize for being late." Tigerstar spoke solemnly and Dawncurl didn't miss the confused chattering which erupted from the gathered cats.

"As you've probably noticed, Sunstar isn't here, and I regret to inform you all that he has passed since our last gathering." The silver tomcat began as he situated himself among the other three leaders.

"I'm sorry to hear that." Viperstar spoke, and she noticed the pang of sympathy in the WinterClan leader's gaze as he dipped his head.

"SummerClan offers you our condolences, but we welcome you to the leader's circle." Fallowstar mewed in turn, however Ivystar remained completely silent.

Fallowstar then went on to speak of SummerClan's progress while Viperstar babbled on about getting through the harshness of leaf-bare. Halfway through, Dawncurl had zoned out until it was Ivystar's turn to speak.

"Despite the struggles leaf-bare causes us to endure, SpringClan continues to thrive. I would like to mention that Fishcape now rightfully belongs to us as it should've all those moons ago."

"Did she just..." Lionglare trailed off.

"Yeah, I think she did. Someone really needs to humble her." Doveflutter muttered.

Dawncurl instantly redirected her gaze to her father, silently hoping he'd set the mottled leader straight. Doveflutter was right, she needed to be humbled, or she needed a *massive* wake up call.

"I'm glad our stolen land has benefited you, enjoy it while you can." Tigerstar spoke, his tone terrifyingly calm as Ivystar narrowed her

sullen gaze on him.

"Is that a threat?" She immediately challenged, neither of them blinking once.

"Perhaps, I'd recommend that you watch your back."

"You have quite the big talk," Ivystar paused, eyes complacently tearing into the FallClan leader, "considering that we defeated you in not only one battle, but two." She spoke, and Dawncurl wanted nothing more than to sink into the ground as Fallowstar shared a cautious glance with Viperstar.

"Next time, you won't be the one gloating." Tigerstar sneered, however Ivystar only grinned at this and Dawncurl found the fur on her back rise at the mottled leader's next statement.

"If you keep going down this path, you'll end up just like Sunstar."

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Dawncurl was about to join Doveflutter and a group of WinterClan warriors until she was stopped by her father, an unreadable expression within his gaze.

"Come with me." He spoke, the urgency in his voice making her uneasy as he led her out of camp to a place they could speak without any interruptions.

"Ivystar has yet again underestimated us and I will not let FallClan's pride and honor diminish to that of a fraudulent leader, so I have a ploy for you specifically." Tigerstar explained, and Dawncurl only tilted her head in a silent question which prompted her father to continue.

"Don't even try to deny what I'm about to say, but I know you have befriended that SpringClan apprentice. I need you to earn her trust, so then we can either use her to get through to Ivystar, or at least we can get some insider information from her." Tigerstar spoke, and Dawncurl looked at him skeptically however she knew better than to diverge his plan.
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"I'll see what I can do."

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Bluepaw was easy to find, and Dawncurl was relieved to see her conversing with Doveflutter and Lionglare. *Maybe she didn't hold a grudge after all.*

"Hello, Bluepaw." Dawncurl greeted slowly as she approached the group, and the blue-gray molly offered her a faint smile.

"Blue*gaze* now." She corrected.

"Congratulations," Dawncurl spoke as she forced a grin, "I'm Dawn-"

"Dawncurl, I know. Doveflutter informed me, and she told me about the happy news." Bluegaze rambled, her eyes just as lively as they were at the last gathering.

"Did she now?" Dawncurl cooed as she playfully eyed her mate who let out a breathy laugh in return.

"Yeah, congratulations to you both."

"Thank you Bluegaze." Doveflutter responded.

"It was nice seeing you again," Lionglare interrupted as he dipped his head to the gray molly, "but it's getting late. I'll see you all in the morning."

"I agree, it is late." Doveflutter responded as she nodded her farewells to Bluegaze.

"Goodnight." Dawncurl purred, pressing her mate's cheek in a silent goodbye before she was left alone with the SpringClan warrior. She felt conflicted, which appeared to be quite common for her. Bluegaze was her friend, but her father laid out a good plan and Dawncurl found herself gravitating to his wants more.

"I can't ignore the fact that this is a little awkward." Bluegaze started, however the statement seemed lighthearted and she laughed nervously in turn.
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"Given the circumstances, yeah, it is a little awkward." Dawncurl shrugged.

"Well, these are times of peace and I don't blame you for all the bloodshed." The gray warrior sighed before she met her gaze and continued speaking, "honestly, call me a nonconformist but all this fighting is ridiculous to me."

"Yeah, you're right. Seems unnecessary." Dawncurl spoke, her gaze subtly analyzing the gray molly ahead of her. Bluegaze seemed forbearing and impartial, which she found useful to whatever cause she was summoning. If she was right in her assumptions, Dawncurl predicted that Bluegaze was most likely a mediator. She found that useful.

"Extremely. This may sound incredibly naive, but I don't understand the rivalry. Why can't we all just get along?"

"That's a question for our ancestors, unfortunately."

"I suppose I'll just have to be patient then." Bluegaze sighed, however Dawncurl didn't miss the way her cerulean gaze lit up as she started to speak again, "but despite some stupid code which forces us to practically hate each other, I consider you a good friend, Dawncurl."

Dawncurl was quiet for a moment, nearly touched by the sincerity in her tone, however she forced the feelings away. If she wanted to make her father proud, she had to gain Bluegaze's trust, and that meant she couldn't care about the blue-gray she-cat. No friendships. No strings attached.

"I consider you a good friend, too."

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The sky was a multitude of different rosy pinks and bright oranges on a cyan base as the sun began to dip beneath the horizon, the remaining light spreading an alluring vermillion glow throughout the mountainside.

"Hey Brinebloom, remember when Leo handed your tail to you that
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one day?" Nightglow smirked which only resulted in the silver tabby to playfully nudge his shoulder.

"It was a small moment of weakness."

"Oh *please*." Leopardlune retorted, resulting in Doveflutter and Lionglare chuckling.

It was the first time the group had been out since their apprenticeship, and Dawncurl made sure to relish in every moment of it. They were all so busy now and it was hard to get everyone together.

"You guys were armatures back then. It was child's play." Blossomfall spoke.

"Oh lighten up, Bloss." Tealpool rolled his eyes, however the sable molly only batted him an uninterested stare.

"Yeah sissy, don't be a buzzkill." Doveflutter grinned as she flickered her sister's shoulder.

"Okay," Blossomfall paused as her gaze grew challenging, "then do a repeat."

"No!" Leopardlune and Brinebloom both spoke in unison before looking at each other awkwardly and sharing a nervous laugh.

"Who's the buzzkill now?" Blossomfall questioned, however Dawncurl didn't fail to notice the faintest grin lacing her face.

"Guys, look at this sunset." The awkward tension was broken by Lionglare who was situated at a small rock jutting out of the mountainside, his golden fur gleaming madly in the cascading light.

"Woah." Dawncurl exhaled as she sat beside him, Lionglare offering her a gentle smile before looking back out.

"Seeing how big the world is really makes us seem so small." Tealpool spoke quietly, Nightglow nodding beside him.

"It's so pretty." Dawncurl spoke, blue gaze widened in awe.

"Not as pretty as you." Doveflutter purred into Dawncurl's ear.

"Gross." Brinebloom cringed.

"Don't ever say that again." Blossomfall grimaced.

"I wish I could go back to five seconds when I didn't hear that." Tealpool muttered, scrunching his nose dramatically.

"I think you both are adorable." Leopardlune purred from where she was perched upon a rock, smug gleam in her eyes.

"Shut up." Doveflutter rolled her eyes which resulted in the assembled group laughing, and once Dawncurl recovered from the embarrassment, she was giggling too.

"Doveflutter, since when were you the romantic type?" Lionglare chuckled.

"*Hopeless romantic,* you mean." Nightglow corrected, amusement lurking beneath his gaze.

"You guys *aren't* funny." Doveflutter hissed.

"I think we're hilarious." Nightglow retorted as he fluttered his eyes to her and smiled innocently.

"I've missed this," Tealpool then spoke, "I've missed us being together, and actually getting along for once."

"Yeah, Doveflutter isn't a pain in the-"

"I wouldn't finish that sentence if I were you." Doveflutter interrupted Brinebloom before he could finish, though the interaction was nothing but playful.

Though as nightfall drew in and they began to head home, Dawncurl couldn't help but feel as though something bad was going to happen. She wasn't sure she really believed in gut feelings, but something was anxiously tugging at her.

As they entered camp, Dawncurl felt her body stiffen. Her clan was

gathered around something, desperate screams and cries filling the air.

"What's going on?" Brinebloom queried, Dawncurl only shrugging as the group of eight approached the scene.

After pushing through the crowd, Dawncurl felt her body completely still as Doveflutter tensed beside her. Her mate's sage gaze was full of utter terror as she stared down at the scene before her.

Before them was Flowerbee, her body seemingly asleep, however it wasn't until Dawncurl noticed the blood at her gapping mouth and the same bloodied x-marking her mother had that made her realize what happened.

Flowerbee was dead.

Not only was the deputy dead, she was murdered, and she was murdered with the same symbol which marked Swanflutter's death.

"No." Doveflutter breathed out as she stared at her lifeless mentor, the break in her voice nearly making Dawncurl's heart shatter.

However Dawncurl found herself worrying more about the inconsistency of her accusations. Hawkhowl was exiled more than half a moon ago. How was she going to cover this one up?

"Graypetal, this is pure *evil!* Two murders and you've heard nothing from StarClan?" Cypressfall hissed, however her voice was more of a plea.

"StarClan has remained silent." Graypetal sighed, his voice chillingly pained as his tail dusted over Flowerbee's lifeless green eyes to close them, his own stare full of despair.

"This makes no sense. Dawncurl, the x marking links this death to your mother's, but Hawkhowl has been gone for quite awhile." Silverpool spoke, and Dawncurl felt her body completely panic.

"Maybe he's been planning this all along." Lakelily muttered, blue gaze livid, though Dawncurl didn't miss the hurt which lurked

beneath them.

"I can't believe we used to live with that vile excuse of a cat." Meadowlark hissed.

Dawncurl felt herself relax as no one seemed to question her story, though her thoughts were interrupted as Tigerstar nosed through the crowd, his gaze oddly pained as he sat directly in front of the dead deputy's body.

"I think we can all agree that Flowerbee— in a way— was someone we all looked up to, and her kind spirit will live on in our clan's legacy." Tigerstar spoke, though Dawncurl couldn't shake the solemn expression which laced his face. His words were either genuine, or he was an extremely talented liar.

"I know she would have made an amazing leader one day." He murmured, and the clan was consumed in a sorrowful silence, and Dawncurl was mentally swearing at herself for being more concerned about her father's reaction than the death of her deputy.

"She was truly the best of us all." Doveflutter spoke, her voice barely a whisper as the clan murmured their agreement, anguish lacing their hushed voices. It was true, Flowerbee was adored by everyone.

"Tigerstar, are you going to appoint another deputy?" Creekwillow then queried, Tigerstar's dulled blue gaze strained as he looked up at her, although Brinebloom replied for him.

"She's only just died," he hissed, "my father has until tomorrow's nightfall to decide."

"No." Tigerstar spoke, the clan growing uncomfortably silent as he looked at them each. Dawncurl was surprised, and she quickly started glancing around. It was probably going to be Meadowlark, or one of the twins. Maybe even Lakelily.

"Flowerbee would have been an amazing leader, so as I ask for StarClan's acceptance, I especially pray for her own blessing." Tigerstar spoke as his gaze brushed over the cats which remained in

their circle.

"I say these words before StarClan, so that the spirits of our warrior ancestors may hear and approve of my choice. The new deputy of FallClan is Dawncurl."

chapter 16

Her mind was a constant battle and it seemed to spare her no breaks. Dawncurl froze as her name left Tigerstar's mouth, his hardening blue depth burning into her own azure stare. While in the clarity of it all, she felt as though everyone else had suddenly disappeared, leaving her alone with just her father.

It felt far from right. It self selfish. It felt tactless.

Tragedy had struck her clan once again, and she was chosen as the deputy. Her mate was devastated by the loss of her mentor, but Dawncurl wasn't even able to comfort her. All she could do was smile.

She *smiled.*

However the white molly instantly snapped out of the trance as disapproving voices started to erupt into her ears, and at first she was hurt, but that hurt turned into anger.

"She's barely a warrior."

"She's far too inexperienced."

"Great, soon we'll be lead by a borderline child, just like SpringClan."

"That's enough." Tigerstar hissed, his former desolation instantly vanishing. Dawncurl didn't look at anyone, instead she kept her focus solely on her father.

"I've made my decision, and I stand by it with every inch of my being. FallClan needs a *strong* leader, and I know my daughter will be just that when the time comes." He spoke, and any pang of hurt she felt by her clan's words instantly faded with his approval. They didn't matter.

Now, she was above them, and something about that was thrilling.

However that feeling of power wasn't nearly as thrilling as the look of pride which glistened in her father's eyes.

The praise was intoxicating.

She loved it.

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Disconcert. Disturb the composure of; unsettle.

For lack of better words, Dawncurl was disconcert. Luckily for her, her accusations weren't brought into question, but she was still uneasy. Cats were dying. They were being murdered, and she had no idea who was doing it, or why.

The white she-cat often wondered if it was her father behind the murders, but it made no sense to her. He had everything going for him, why would he do it? Swanflutter was his mate, and seeing how he reacted to Flowerbee's death, he seemed to have found care for the deputy in his cold heart as well. Then again, maybe he had everyone fooled, including Dawncurl herself.

Though she found herself making justifications for it in her mind. As her mother always said; *anyone can be justified.*

She wondered if Swanflutter would still be saying that to whoever was her murderer. Her mom seemed too forgiving, and it peeved Dawncurl off more than she'd like to admit.

As Dawncurl carried herself through Needle Point, she had tried to clear the thoughts from her mind. At the previous gathering, Tigerstar had given her a task and she was determined to fulfill it.

She had finally made it to the small clearing she had avoided for so long, the clearing which no longer was apart of her home.

She had heard Bluegaze speak of visiting the pond in the mornings, claiming that it was one of most beautiful sights she had seen. To her luck, Bluegaze was situated at Fishcape's bank, the sunlight reflecting from the water into her blue gaze.
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"You must be really bored to come all the way out here for a pretty view." Dawncurl began to let the other molly aware of her presence.

Bluegaze's cerulean stare flickered up, and for a moment she seemed startled until her gaze softened.

"I'm an early bird." She grinned as she dipped her paw into the cold water before continuing, "what are you doing here? Not to be uptight or anything, but Fishcape belongs to SpringClan now. You're kinda intruding."

"Wasn't it you who asked why we couldn't all get along?" Dawncurl prompted and Bluegaze fell quiet for a few moments.

"Yeah, I suppose."

"I hope you haven't had a change of heart then."

"Definitely not." Bluegaze reassured as she offered Dawncurl a faint smile in which she reciprocated back.

"When you said we were friends, it just meant something, and I don't want to be limited to only seeing each other once a season." Dawncurl went on to explain, internally cringing as the words left her mouth.

"Really?" Bluegaze questioned, the nearly innocent gleam in her eyes almost taunting.

"Really." Dawncurl smiled.

Since that day, Dawncurl found herself meeting with the blue-gray warrior nearly every morning. At first, it was routine and simply something she was forced to do. However over time, she grew excited of the trips. Bluegaze was eccentric in the best way possible and her energy was contagious. She kept Dawncurl on her toes and offered her a release. The SpringClan warrior was always outgoing. She was always buoyant. Dawncurl was a realist, Bluegaze an idealist. She seemed to oppose her in every way possible, and she found it so intriguing. She found Bluegaze interesting.

She was perfect at hiding the trips, too. Doveflutter was *too* trusting,

it almost made Dawncurl worry. Leopardlune was too obsessed with her own life and chaos to notice anything different. Brinebloom was back to ignoring her again, however she knew why. He was jealous because she got a pretty new title and he was in her shadow once more.

She informed Tigerstar of everything though, relishing in his words of praise and encouragement. No one was getting hurt, and she was benefiting her clan. It was all working in her favor.

Today was no different. She had made the early morning trip to be met by a typically radiant Bluegaze, rambling on about her life. Dawncurl was typically the listener, but she didn't mind. She was just waiting for the gray warrior to say something useful.

Until she did.

"Ivystar has been more overbearing than usual."

"What do you mean?" Dawncurl questioned, trying to seem uninterested as her claw twirled with a blooming flower due to the arrival of new-leaf.

"I overheard her talking to Yellowbird and Mudflower about seeing dogs near our border the other day. She seemed completely crazy. I swear she's paranoid all the time." Bluegaze continued to vent as she sat on her back, paws up in the air until she looked back to Dawncurl.

"What border?" The white she-cat queried.

"Our border with you, so-" Bluegaze paused as the realization hit her, "so I guess around here, but don't stress. She's delusional."

"Right." Dawncurl spoke, nearly to herself, until Bluegaze continued talking.

"I think she regrets taking it honestly, and I don't blame her. It seems to have brought her more trouble, but she's too stubborn to admit it." Bluegaze laughed until she fell quiet and met Dawncurl's gaze and spoke again, "I know you guys have your opinions over her, but she really is trying her best. Ivystar's had a lot pressure on

her since she was little, it has to take a toll on someone." Bluegaze said softly.

"Trust me, I understand. More than you know."

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"I have news which may interest you."

Dawncurl abruptly entered her father's den, who was conversing with Graypetal until she met his gaze. She stood there, her blue eyes unwavering from his as he sent Graypetal away and promoted her to continue.

"Bluegaze said that Ivystar is slipping. She called her paranoid-delusional even. A weakening leader means a weakening clan."

Tigerstar was quiet, a satisfied gleam lurking beneath his gaze.

"It was about time little miss sunshine slipped with something actually useful." He purred and Dawncurl just nodded stiffly as she approached him and sat down.

"I say we continue to let her diminish, then attack."

"Actually, I have a better idea." Dawncurl spoke, and her father tilted his head before he cued her to continue speaking.

"She said that Ivystar seems to regret having taken Fishcape to begin with, saying that she saw dogs. Bluegaze called her delusional, but I don't so. Goldenfell had mentioned that during the beginning of new-leaf, twolegs are prominent for the warm weather. Where there's twolegs, there are dogs."

"Where are you going with this?" Tigerstar questioned, and Dawncurl had to swallow the lump forming in her throat.

"If we can convince Ivystar that Fishcape is more trouble than beneficial to her, she'll return it on her own free will and FallClan remains untouched by yet another battle."

"And how do we do that?"
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No friendships. No strings attached.

"We draw the dogs to them."

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Goldenfell was right, and so was Ivystar. Dawncurl and Tigerstar had made a trip to the twoleg dens which used to be abandoned to see them absolutely swarmed.

The dog were there as well, however confined by a rope which connected to a nylon fabric around it's neck.

"Are we really doing this?" Dawncurl queried as her worried gaze met her father's.

"Yes, we are. Confidence, Dawncurl. You can't be scared."

She wasn't scared. Not at all. She was guilty, and unbelievably so. She was betraying her friend, and no matter how many times she tried to convince herself that Bluegaze was a means to an end, she knew she was much more than that.

She was someone who laid their heart on their sleeve, and Dawncurl had completely taken advantage of it.

"I'm not scared."

"Good."

Dawncurl followed her father, the two creeping through the tall grass until meeting the wooden fence and slipping underneath.

"You get the rope free, I'll lead it out." Tigerstar demanded and she nodded urgently until slowly creeping past the snoozing dog and settling by the rope, teeth instantly nibbling harshly at it. She could feel the tension building up in her chest, trying to ignore Tigerstar's bearing gaze as her teeth worked with the rope.

"We don't have all day, if we do this now, we'll be in time with the dawn patrol." Tigerstar hissed.
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"I'm trying, it's really hard." She muttered, however she could feel it loosening under her grip which motivated her to bite harder and more aggressively, flinching as the dog moved. Finally, the rope snapped and Tigerstar nodded, his eyes falling into slits as he released a forceful yowl. Dawncurl watched as the dog suddenly awoke, and her father immediately took off, resulting in the dog chasing after him sloppily.

Eventually, she was chasing after them, the dog's nonstop barking leading her into the right direction.

She could feel her legs burning until she was blindly attacked, her nerves completely reaching an all time high until she looked up to see Tigerstar. Her father had her pinned, shushing her until she calmed down and he let her go.

"Where is it?" She was nearly screaming.

"I lead it to Fishcape, our job is done. We have been successful."

Dawncurl nodded curtly, however she didn't feel successful. She felt sick.

How far was she going to go just to please her father?

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Hey guys! I just wanted to formally thank you all for the support this book has been receiving. It just reached over a thousand views and I cannot tell you guys how much that means to me. <3

I hope you guys enjoyed! Next chapter is crazy hehe.

chapter 17

"Keep your tail low. You're going to scare off all the prey before you even get a chance to find any." Dawncurl hissed under her breath which only resulted in Risingpaw swatting her a rather unpleasant glare.

"Be delicate on your paws too!" Leopardlune chimed in, her eyes much more encouraging than Dawncurl's were. The deputy had decided to take her apprentice out after assigning the day's patrols and Leopardlune wanted to tag along. Dawncurl was fine with it until her friend insisted they bring Brinebloom too.

Risingpaw crept forward and Dawncurl analyzed her apprentice, watching as she followed the criticism thrown at her. Eventually, everyone fell still as a mouse came into view and she didn't miss the defying glare in the green-eyed molly's gaze as she slowly crept forward.

Eventually, Risingpaw launched her attack when she was in leaping distance and Dawncurl watched as she caught the mouse between her dainty paws, immediately sending the death blow. She twisted around to face them, eyes gleaming with the small corpse hanging from her jaws.

"Well done." Brinebloom nodded, his ear flickering.

"It's like I get three mentors for a day." The apprentice grinned and Leopardlune beamed down at her in turn.

"Yeah, but I'm the best." The cream bengal boasted. Dawncurl watched the interaction silently, and while it was lighthearted, she couldn't help but feel as though Leopardlune should've been her actual mentor. Risingpaw seemed to match her better.

"You should come more often." Risingpaw chirped as she raced ahead of the group and Leopardlune chuckled.

"Maybe I will."

"Hey," Brinebloom then spoke as he fell into step with Dawncurl, "where were you and dad yesterday evening? You were gone a long time." Her brother queried and Dawncurl met his unwavering gaze, however she kept her own stare void to hide her panic.

"We were just taking a walk."

"Oh." Brinebloom spoke, though he was clearly unconvinced. "*Just walking?"*

"Why that tone?" Dawncurl retorted, her voice much more defensive than she meant it to be. Brinebloom stared at her with reserved blue eyes before he shook his head and brushed past her to join Leopardlune, leaving Dawncurl in the back.

As they made it back home, Dawncurl smelt the familiar tang of SpringClan, her stomach instantly sinking.

"What's that smell?" Risingpaw mumbled as she scrunched her nose in disgust, Leopardlune shrugging as she met Dawncurl's gaze as if she expected an answer from her.

"Good, you're back!" Doveflutter rushed as she met them by the entrance, an unreadable expression within her sage eyes. Dawncurl looked at her with questioning eyes until Doveflutter motioned with her tail to Tigerstar's den where she saw the familiar white-brown pelt of Ivystar. She was accompanied by Yellowbird and another warrior who was unfamiliar to her.

"What are they doing here?" Brinebloom questioned, his voice grim, however Doveflutter only shrugged. Dawncurl didn't hesitate as she approached the leader's den and dipped her head in, watching the four cats turn to face her.

"What's going on?" She asked, voice urgent and borderline demanding. She looked at her father first until she met Ivystar's gaze, however she didn't seem nearly as intimidating as she normally was. Dawncurl was immediately drowned in a wave of confusion as she noticed the pain which stained Ivystar's reddened

gaze.

"We are surrendering Fishcape back to FallClan." She spoke, her voice intolerably delicate as she exhaled shakily. "At sunhigh, one of our patrols was attacked by a dog. We lost three warriors. We almost lost four, however Cicadasong survived, but barely." She explained. She seemed so small. So fragile.

Dawncurl felt chills bled throughout every inch of her skin, blue eyes desperately meeting her father's, as if she was almost silently screaming at him. *What have we done?*

"We give you and your fallen warriors our condolences." Tigerstar spoke, his words caring and empathetic as he ignored her silent plea. Dawncurl didn't respond. She didn't know what to say.

"We appreciate it." The SpringClan warrior spoke, seeing as Ivystar seemed unable to.

"We also wanted to announce that we would like to call a truce. SpringClan is pleading neutral, we can't take another bloodbath." Yellowbird spoke up, his voice dull. He seemed so defeated.

"We accept your respite." Tigerstar replied as he dipped his head in an act of respect, the others doing the same.

"That will be all. Yellowbird, Havenglow, let's return home." Ivystar spoke, tone completely monotone as she sat up and headed for the exit of Tigerstar's den. Yellowbird instantly followed after her, however Havenglow remained for a few stalled seconds and Dawncurl felt her body chill as the SpringClan she-cat sent them a threatening glare before she left too.

Dawncurl sat in utter silence until they left, her mind crashing with a multitude of thoughts. It wasn't until Tigerstar spoke up that she finally looked up.

"That was *genius."* He grinned. "You're a genius, Dawncurl."

She looked at him, any former terror fading into disgust. Genius? It was cruel. It was immoral. It was gross.

"Cats died. They are *dead.* Innocent lives were *taken*."

"Collateral damage." Tigerstar shrugged, and Dawncurl just held his gaze. She could feel her eyes swelling, her nose burning.

"Don't even think about crying." The leader hissed, malice tainting his husky voice. "Crying is weakness. No daughter of mine can show weakness, much less *my* deputy. We did what needed to be done."

Dawncurl wanted to scream. She wanted to scream and yell and kick and wail. What if Bluegaze was on the patrol? The thoughts made her body shudder. *Don't cry.* She couldn't be weak. Dawncurl exhaled shakily as she blinked the building up tears away, meeting her father's gaze with her own blue eyes, still teary and round despite her efforts to appear strong.

"We went too far." She spoke, nearly whispered, her voice cracking. She tried to read his gaze desperately, though it was unreadable.

"It was a needed sacrifice, and we were triumphant. That's all the matters. FallClan comes first."

Dawncurl fell quiet as her breathing finally evened out. She wasn't typically an emotional cat, really, she wasn't very emotional at all. She was taught from an early age that emotions were weak. That crying was a vulnerability no one should ever see.

"Are you through?" Tigerstar glared, and Dawncurl just nodded stiffly, forcing herself not to sniffle as she fixed her posture. *Compose yourself, crying is weakness. Emotions are weakness.*

"Good, because I have something important to tell you." Tigerstar began, his ears pinned and eyes bleak. Dawncurl stared at him, however she didn't respond, letting him continue on his own.

"When I went to Hallowed Cavern to receive my nine lives, I wasn't greeted by StarClan, even though I did everything Graypetal told me." The tabby spoke, and she could feel her stomach churning. *If StarClan didn't greet her father during his coronation, did that mean...*

"Dad," she paused as she looked at him, "how many lives do you have?"

Tigerstar didn't look at her once and she didn't hide the confusion on her face as her bearing gaze tore into her father.

"One. I have one life."

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"I think we need to start spending more time as a family."

Dawncurl didn't look at her father as he spoke, and she noticed Brinebloom didn't either. The air was suffocating and all she wanted was to be at home, curled up in her nest with her mate. She had enough family drama to last her a lifetime, and she had no idea why her father wanted to spend family time all of a sudden anyways.

"You both know I love you, right?"

Dawncurl tensed, and she could sense Brinebloom stiffen too. The siblings shared a nearly apprehensive glance before looking at Tigerstar.

"We love you too, father." Dawncurl spoke, rather hesitantly, however Brinebloom said nothing. It was odd, and Dawncurl found herself questioning her father, questioning his motives, questioning everything.

"I'm hard on you both, and I know that, but it's only because I want the best for you. And look where's it gotten you both." Tigerstar continued on, tail flicking. "But I do love you, and I don't tell you that enough."

Dawncurl looked at him, her confusion completely fading. Whatever he was doing, it was working. His words were soothing and she found comfort in them. Maybe with the absence of her mother's love, seeing her father be so compassionate towards them was nice.

"You have a funny way of showing it." She heard Brinebloom mumble under his breath, and she assumed he probably didn't mean for her to hear. She didn't blame her brother, though. He was completely screwed over ever since she became a regular
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apprentice, and if you looked close enough, you could see the small strip of damaged skin Tigerstar had left behind on his face all those moons ago.

The three walked in silence, Tigerstar content and Brinebloom contempt. Maybe Dawncurl was the latter. However she didn't dwell on it long as foliage rustled in the bushes, the three pausing as they tried to detect the scent.

"*SpringClan."* Tigerstar growled.

Dawncurl wasn't given time to question her father as they showed their faces. First was the warrior from earlier, Havenglow, as well as Creamlily and Harvestleaf.

However it wasn't until Bluegaze emerged that Dawncurl was left stunned. Blue met blue and every part of her seemed to grow weak. Eyes which were once full and bright were now dulled by malice, a sight so painfully foreign. She had never seen Bluegaze like this, she didn't even think the lively molly was even capable of it.

"What are you doing on FallClan territory?" Brinebloom questioned, tone hardening and stern as he kept his gaze glued on the four of them.

"Ask Dawncurl. She'll know." Bluegaze spoke, each word just as callous as the next. Dawncurl wanted to shrink as Brinebloom sent her a questioning stare.

"I was thinking, you know, about the attack on Fishcape," Bluegaze started as she began to circle the FallClan warriors, "at the last battle, you were ready to claw right *through me* just to start meeting me at the border since the gathering because we were supposedly friends."

"What?" Brinebloom breathed out, however Bluegaze continued talking.

"I trusted you, but that's what you wanted, right? To gain my trust just to use it to your own advantage. StarClan Dawncurl! It was brilliant. You had me fooled." She laughed, nearly manically, and

the sight was far from pleasant. Dawncurl was terrified.

"The dog killed Snowstep. The dog killed Flurryfall, my *mentor.* And you know who else? Brindlebird. My best friend, but you didn't think about that, did you? Because you are selfish. You are *sick."*

Dawncurl stared at her with longing blue eyes, desperately trying to find the right words, however all she was able to do was mutter a strained sorry.

"I'm sure you are." Harvestleaf sneered, his claws digging into the ground beneath him.

"You'll really be sorry when we're done with you." Creamlily cooed, a sickening grin crossing her jaw. Dawncurl wasn't able to process the words until she heard someone call the attack, and every muscle in her body seemed to turn to stone.

Havenglow and Harvestleaf immediately launched themselves at her father, yowls erupting into the once peaceful air until she felt claws meet her shoulder, a surprised whimper leaving her jaw. Dawncurl twisted around to meet blazing eyes and bared teeth. *Creamlily.*

Finally the situation clicked in her mind, and Dawncurl grit her ivory teeth, claws unsheathing as she ripped her shoulder from bared teeth, wincing at the stinging sensation until she had her claws swinging to the molly's face.

"You're a lot bigger now, this will be fun." Creamlily cooed, her tail lashing back and forth. Dawncurl's eyes fell into slits. *Composure, Dawncurl.*

"You're right, it will be." The white she-cat grinned, her head dipping and ears pinning, the two circling each other until she made the first attack, claws extending out. Creamlily didn't dodge the blow, instead she reared up on her hind legs, claws slashing out. Both of the she-cats sent deadly blows to each other as they struggled on their back legs, Creamlily ripping through her ear as she sent one to her opponent's chest.

"I'm going to crush you," Creamlily sneered as her nostrils flared, "just like your *pretty little mate."*

Everything changed when the SpringClan warrior spoke and Dawncurl felt all of her senses fade and it seemed as if all of her inhibitions were completely gone. Suddenly, the terrified look which laced Doveflutter's face all those moons ago didn't leave her mind. If she was holding back before, she definitely wasn't now.

Dawncurl dodged her blow, and the next, before she backed away, nostrils flared and eyes on fire. As Creamlily mocked her once again, she cut her off mid sentence. The deputy jumped off her hindquarters, claws immediately digging into Creamlily's shoulder blades and teeth meeting her neck. White became red as Dawncurl's pale paws were stained with the she-cat's blood and the sight only encouraged her to dig deeper, teeth ripping to the right and up as Creamlily's flesh, blood and fur hung from her jaw. The agonizing shriek which left her mouth was music to Dawncurl's ears, and she let her claws wrap to her chest, and she raked them up, an almost menacing grin lacing her face. This resulted in Creamlily releasing another shear whimper before bucking her body and crashing into a tree, leaving Dawncurl breathless as the two rolled around. Creamlily had managed another miscalculated blow to her cheek and Dawncurl shivered as her own blood dripped onto her tongue.

She was able to grab the upper hand again as they tossed around in a battle of pure tooth and claw until Dawncurl had her pinned, claws pressing into her bloodied neck with all of her weight.

"Doesn't feel nice, does it?" She whispered into Creamlily's ear, the warrior's pleading gaze making Dawncurl push harder. She was sure she would've killed had she not been knocked off.

Dawncurl's gaze widened as she met enraged blue eyes, staring up to Bluegaze on top of her, eyes glaring madly. The FallClan deputy felt herself snap back into reality as her once savage gaze rounded in guilt.

"Bluegaze-"

"Save it." Her former friend snarled, and Bluegaze didn't hesitant as

she dug her sharpened teeth into Dawncurl's already wounded shoulder. She let out a shriek, eyes clenching as she shook her head and ripped flesh. Dawncurl's eyes snapped open, fury shining in them as she was able to free a paw, not hesitating as she sent it flying to her face. When her claws met Bluegaze's face, she kicked into the soft side of her belly before rolling out of her grasp and stumbling to her paws, fur completely crimson-stained and matted.

Dawncurl didn't waste the moment as she hurled herself towards the gray molly, forcing herself to block out the sting in her shoulder as she reared onto her hindquarters and sent extended claws to both of her ears. Bluegaze shrilled as blood began to pool down her face, her eyes maddening as she sent her teeth to her shoulder and Dawncurl winced, eyes clenching once more until she was able to press her body weight onto her and had Bluegaze struggling.

Finally, Bluegaze broke and fell to the ground, Dawncurl with her. The two rolled around in a frenzy, both minds full of utter delirium until Dawncurl had her pinned, claws pressed into her shoulders to keep her steady.

"Bluegaze, I don't want to hurt you." Dawncurl pleaded as she stared into her eyes, however she didn't waver beneath her. Instead, her eyes fell even more deranged.

"You already did."

She could feel her heart shatter in her chest, and in her moment of weakness, Dawncurl was attacked by Creamlily once again and Bluegaze was instantly by her side, both sending merciless blows. Dawncurl felt her heart drum against her chest, constantly twisting between the two to send her own attacks. It wasn't until she caught her father underneath Harvestleaf that she froze, his eyes drowsy as Harvestleaf raised his claw.

"Brinebloom!" Dawncurl screamed, voice strained and pained as her brother looked at her frantically from where he was fighting Havenglow.

"Dad!" She hissed, motioning to her father as Creamlily and Bluegaze kept her retrained. She could see the uncertainty in her

brother's cerulean eyes, and everything in her slowed as she exhaled shakily, blood dripping from her jaw.

"He only has one life, *now,* Brinebloom!" Dawncurl ushered, and Brinebloom finally broke away from the molly he was fighting as he charged to Harvestleaf and barreled into him. Dawncurl felt herself sigh in relief, suddenly growing irritated as Creamlily and Bluegaze held her down.

Twisting around, she sent a powerful blow to Creamlily's eyes, and the warrior relented as she backed away recklessly, blood oozing from the wound as she released a high-pitched shrill. Dawncurl grinned until she faced Bluegaze, the two staring madly at each other, however she wasn't given another chance to fight as her father approached, seemingly recovered from his previous fight. It all happened so fast, but suddenly he had swatted a powerful paw to Bluegaze's face and sent her tumbling to the ground. She could tell the blue-gray molly was growing weak and tired, and she knew her father was taking advantage of it, and she knew Tigerstar was aware she was holding back when it came to her.

She couldn't bring herself to go to her full potential with Bluegaze, so he did it for her, and the sight was one of the worst things she had ever witnessed as Tigerstar just sent her merciless blows, her dainty body shuddering at each one.

"Dad, that's enough." Dawncurl hissed, however he didn't stop, his eyes glaring madly as he progressed forward.

"Dad." Dawncurl repeated, but he wasn't listening.

"Dad!" Dawncurl screamed, her voice frantic until Tigerstar finally stepped back, and her face completely dropped. Bluegaze was sprawled out, covered in a pool of blood, fur and dirt. She could hardly recognize her.

"Listen here!" Tigerstar snarled, Harvestleaf rushing to aid a blinded Creamlily as Havenglow stared down at Bluegaze, eyes widened in disbelief.

"I don't care what peace your leader has set out, but this is an *act of*

war." Tigerstar declared, eyes narrowed. "If Ivystar knows what's best for her, she will take the death of Bluegaze as a sign to not retaliate because I can assure you of one thing; you *will lose."*

"You're right," Havenglow muttered, however her eyes weren't glaring, they were just desolate, "this is an act of war, and will treat it as such."

As they made their threats clear, Dawncurl felt her legs completely buckle beneath her as she watched the defeated SpringClan warriors gather Bluegaze's mangled and battered body. *I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry.*

She kept repeating the apology in her mind, and the mental grief was much more painful than her physical wounds. Bluegaze was her friend. She was one of the very best cats Dawncurl had ever met. She was the definition of optimism. She was *good.*

And now, she was dead.

chapter 18

My past has tasted bitter for years now
So I weild an iron fist
Grace is just weakness
Or so I've been told
I've been cold, I've been merciless
But the blood on my hands scares me to death
Maybe I'm waking up today.

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Nothing made sense. His thoughts. His feelings. Nothing. Truth be told, he felt trapped. He felt consumed in an indestructible field and he wasn't sure there was anything worse than his restricting mentality.

Mid spring rainfall coated the lands, the sky holding a murky gray which sheltered life below from the sun. Morning fog settled and the ground was damp and muddy.

A sickness was spreading throughout camp and it was apparently bad enough that it kept Graypetal worried. Fernpaw got sick first, complaining about a fever and sore throat. Next was Duskfur. Tealpool was the last to be diagnosed, and he had it the worst.

Brinebloom had tried to visit his friend, however Graypetal wouldn't allow it. The medicine cat was only allowing immediate family, so Doveflutter and Blossomfall were staying by his side.

Despite the spreading sickness and overall muggy atmosphere, life continued on. He watched his sister sharing tongues and talking with Lionglare and Nightglow. She still had cobwebs glued to her body, however she was slowly healing— physically, that is— he was sure Dawncurl was struggling with an immense mental battle, just as he was.

Brinebloom had been so mad at her and he constantly found himself

blaming her for all of his problems. He grew up with instant admiration, and now his father hardly noticed him.

Now, he wasn't so sure he even wanted his father's attention. Seeing the toll it was taking on Dawncurl was almost terrifying. Tigerstar was turning his sister into a war criminal.

Brinebloom let out a shaky sigh as he padded to a puddle, watching the water ripple as rain droplets shattered the surface. In the distorted water, he glanced at his reflection, gently placing his paw on the small scar which laced his face. Dawncurl may have fallen into Tigerstar's trap, but she grew up with Swanflutter's undying love. Not Brinebloom. His mother was never that affectionate to him.

Now she was dead, and his father was someone Brinebloom was coming to realize as ruthless. However one small detail stuck in his mind, replaying over and over.

In an attempt to save his life, Dawncurl had released secretive information, information which could be detrimental. *Tigerstar was never given nine lives.*

Brinebloom wasn't the violent type. Vindictive maybe, but never violent. However the silver tomcat found himself conflicted.

"Hey you." Leopardlune beamed, her golden eyes ablaze as she nudged his shoulder. "How's your shoulder?"

"Hurts." Brinebloom spoke and Leopardlune held his gaze momentarily before she spoke again.

"Those SpringClan cats are crazy." She mused, shaking her head before she settled beside him. Leopardlune wasn't much for personal space. "I've been training Risingpaw lately, because Dawncurl is really busy and she was in the medicine cat den for so long. She's great though, a little demanding to be an apprentice, but great. I think she likes me more than your sister." The bengal rambled on. Brinebloom didn't mind her excessive babbling though. Leopardlune loved to talk about herself, and Brinebloom hated to talk about himself, so it kinda worked perfectly. Usually he would

get annoyed with such outgoing cats, but he didn't mind her company.

"Blossomfall said Tealpool is feeling better too, so that's good. I was coughing earlier, what if I have it? That can't be good," Leopardlune paused as a questioning look crossed her face, "I should probably talk to Graypetal about it, but he's just been so busy, you know? I don't want to be a burden."

"You, a burden? Never." Brinebloom playfully mocked and Leopardlune only rolled her eyes.

"I heard Dawncurl mention that Tigerstar may have it, too. But don't tell her I told you, she said it's classified information. She's so dramatic." Leopardlune giggled, however this quickly caught Brinebloom's attention as he looked at the molly beside him.

"What do you mean?"

"Tigerstar may be sick. Apparently it's looking really bad. Has Dawncurl all worried, but I don't know why. So what he dies? He has eight other lives. Big deal." She continued to ramble but Brinebloom zoned her out as he fell into his own thoughts. *Tigerstar is sick? If this sickness takes him out, then that's it. He's done for. If not, it'll definitely weaken him...*

"... Dahlias are really pretty too, but I heard they're poisonous. Hey! Maybe that's what got everyone so sick? I'm a genius, don't ya think? Brinebloom? Brinebloom are you even listening to me? Brinebloom!"

"What? I'm listening." Brinebloom shook his head, meeting her frustrated gaze.

"Sure you were." Leopardlune scorned, however Brinebloom's attention was then drawn to Tigerstar as his father left his den, fur mangled and sticking to his thin frame.

"Where's he going?" The she-cat then queried, a puzzled expression crossing her face.

"I'm not sure." Brinebloom breathed out, nearly to himself, as

Tigerstar slipped out of camp.

"Hey Leo, I'm going to head out for a little." Brinebloom quickly spoke as he stood to his paws, Leopardlune doing the same as a frown crossed her face.

"Can't I come?"

Brinebloom's face softened as he gently placed his tail on her shoulder, eyes melting into a saddened gold.

"I need to be alone for a bit, but we can hang out later. Maybe head to Clearfalls or something. Just you and me."

Leopardlune was quiet for a moment, her gaze flickering between both of his eyes as she pinned her ears.

"Promise?"

Brinebloom held her gaze, a small smile crossing his face as he nodded softly.

"Promise."

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Brinebloom was quiet on his paws, cerulean gaze dusting over every inch of the forest as he tasted the air, trying to pick up his father's scent. Eventually he was able to catch it which eventually led him to the FallClan leader.

Brinebloom slowly crept forward, rounded eyes landing on the silvery gray tomcat ahead of him. He wasn't sure what he was doing, but he felt as if some other physical force was pulling him forward.

Brinebloom didn't hesitate as he stepped forward, gaze hardening as Tigerstar twisted around to face him, head tilting in confusion.

"What are you doing here boy?"

"You don't look too good." Brinebloom responded, voice completely
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monotone as he avoided Tigerstar's question. Tigerstar's eyes curved into slits and Brinebloom didn't fail to notice the way his tongue curled over his bottom lip.

"Not sure if you were aware of the sickness spreading around. What a nuisance it is." Tigerstar spoke, almost casually, as he curled his tail around his paws.

"Sorry you're not feeling well." Brinebloom replied, although he didn't miss the quiver in his own voice. It was as if a montage of every moment in his life which included Tigerstar flashed before him, and he could only notice how every time he was around his father, he was full of utter dread. He never felt at peace. He never felt loved. Just fear.

All his life he let that fear guide him. Control him. Break him.

He let that fear drive a wedge between he and his sister over something he should have never envied, and it only took the previous scuffle with SpringClan to be the wake up call he needed to finally realize it.

"You know," Brinebloom started, "I've been thinking a lot."

"You don't say." Tigerstar mumbled.

"I wasted so much of my childhood in fear of disappointing you. It would keep me up at night, you know? I was always questioning if you'd be proud of what I had accomplished, or if it was ever enough for you. I was worried that every mistake I made was another scar you'd add to my body."

Tigerstar was quiet for a moment, and Brinebloom was having a mental battle with himself, one half of him praying that he could stay composed, the other half wanting to immediately cower and apologize. However the damage had been done and he had to continue going over all the bad things Tigerstar did in his head to remain the least bit controlled.

"In the end, it's made you strong. Tough love never hurt anyone."

"*Tough love?"* Brinebloom mocked, a scornful laugh leaning his

mouth. "Never hurt anyone? Then explain the scar on my face." He hissed, however the pain was evident in his tone as he glared at his father with unapologetic blue eyes.

"You don't know a single thing about love." Brinebloom concluded, his tone growing reserved as he kept his gaze on his father before him.

"If you're here to start a fight, I couldn't care less. You're just wasting your breath, so take your anger out elsewhere. I don't have the time for it." Tigerstar sneered, and Brinebloom fell silent once again. He could feel his teeth grinding as his claws flexed in the mud beneath him, and this seemed to tell Tigerstar enough.

"Think wisely of your actions *boy*." Tigerstar spoke, nearly whispered, and Brinebloom lowered his head as he pinned his ears.

"Trust me, I have." Brinebloom snarled, tail lashing back and fourth fiercely, however Tigerstar didn't falter as he immediately launched an attack. Caught off guard, Brinebloom winced as claws met his skin and he immediately began to fight back. Tigerstar was weaker, and noticeably so. *I can win. I have to win.*

Brinebloom released a deafening yowl as he forced himself forward and Tigerstar yanked back. He twisted around, shuddering from the pain as he looked at his father who glared at him, his own fur and blood dripping from his mouth.

Lashing his tail, Brinebloom leaped onto a fallen log, eyes gleaming as he hurled himself to the leader. His claws immediately met Tigerstar's back and he dug in, letting his anger completely take over. As Tigerstar started to buck, Brinebloom sunk his claws deeper to keep a firm grasp, his teeth meeting his father's scruff as he shook his head and ripped forward.

This elicited a satisfying shrill from the tom beneath him and Brinebloom tried pushing all of his weight onto Tigerstar, however he was bucked off and landed roughly on the ground, his fur a mixture of blood and mud as he panted.

"You fool! You think you can defeat me?" Tigerstar cried out, blue

eyes ablaze. "You can't conquer your maker."

"I'll enjoy proving you wrong." Brinebloom taunted as he hauled himself towards the silver-gray tomcat, claws extended as he sent merciless blows.

"I spent so much time trying to get you to notice me after you got so wrapped up in Dawncurl." Brinebloom hissed, claws slicing Tigerstar's chin before continuing, "but I finally realized I avoided falling victim to your manipulation!" He was nearly screaming as he sent another anger-powered slash to Tigerstar's cheek, sending his father flying to the ground.

Panting heavily, Brinebloom approached Tigerstar's nearly quivering body, eyes nothing but enraged as he pushed the thinned tomcat onto his back.

"I convinced myself for so long that I was a bad cat for not loving you, but I realized that there was nothing to ever love." He growled as he met Tigerstar's flickering gaze, a pained look replacing Brinebloom's previously furious gaze. "Maybe there is some good in your heart, and I hope for your own sake you're able to find it."

It was his farewell. His closure. Brinebloom looked down at Tigerstar, his father who always appeared unbreakable, now broken.

Brinebloom exhaled shakily as he sat at his head, raising a claw as he placed it down at Tigerstar's neck, muttering a quiet sorry until sinking his claw down and ripping through his jugular.

Brinebloom just sat there, rigid, as the blood began to pool from the wound and the remaining life in Tigerstar's gaze completely ebbed away.

Bittersweet was the best explanation Brinebloom could call it. Bitter in the sense that his dad was dead, and by his own paws, yet sweet because of the weight which instantly lifted from his shoulders.

It was exhilarating almost, the feeling of freedom, the decline of fear. Brinebloom looked up to the murky sky, rainfall drenching his

coat and rolling off his whiskers as he was able to even his breathing. He had never felt so alive.

He had never felt so safe.

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"It's been three days. I wonder if Tigerstar abandoned us?" Lionglare queried softly, his head rested on his paws.

"Why? That makes no sense." Blossomfall responded, tail flickering in response. Brinebloom shifted uncomfortably, luckily however, no one seemed to notice his unease.

"Dawncurl, what are you going to do?" Tealpool questioned. He was much smaller, however Graypetal finally deemed him well enough to be free of the medicine cat's den. Apparently the sickness wasn't contagious and Graypetal guessed it was something bad with that day's fresh-kill.

Dawncurl was sat beside Doveflutter, nearly leaned upon her, her eyes emotionless as she shrugged.

"I have no clue." She confessed.

"What if SpringClan took him?" Leopardlune questioned, the others sharing uneasy glances. Brinebloom could feel the panic bubbling within his chest.

"Dawncurl!"

Brinebloom froze as his sister's name was called, his heart nearly stopping within his chest as he turned around to see Spottedbee and Southlight frantically pushing into camp, a decaying Tigerstar being hauled in by them.

"No way." He heard Blossomfall mutter under her breath, his eyes widened as his clan began pooling out of their dens.

"How is this possible?" Lakelily shrieked, others yowling in agreement.
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"I don't know." Dawncurl spoke, her voice almost breathless as she stared down at her dead father. Brinebloom couldn't tell if she was upset or not.

"He had only just ascended, this is impossible." Meadowlark reasoned, however no one replied. Dawncurl slowly approached Tigerstar's body, desolation lurking within her gaze.

"What if it's the same cat who killed Swanflutter and Flowerbee?" Frostbird queried. Graypetal left his spot in the crowd to join Dawncurl by his body, his head shaking to her question.

"Those deaths were precise. They were clean kills. Someone was trying to make a point with them. This however, this was a fight. I doubt they were by the same cat." Graypetal explained and Brinebloom had to force himself to remain calm as he glanced at the small wound on his shoulder.

Eventually as the chaos subsided and Tigerstar's body was cleaned in preparation for his vigil, Dawncurl slowly walked towards her brother, her gaze oddly cold as she settled down beside him. They sat in an uneasy silence before she spoke up.

"Tell me you didn't do it." She spoke, and Brinebloom instantly met her gaze, his eyes flickering back and forth between her blue gaze.

"Tell me you weren't that stupid." She said again, her voice nearly a plea. Brinebloom didn't respond, instead he dipped his head, eyes glued to his paws. This was all Dawncurl needed to answer her question.

"Just try to understand," Brinebloom started shakily, "I was freeing us from him. I was doing a *good thing."* He tried to persuade, however he was pretty sure he was trying to convince himself more than he was trying to convince her.

"Stop talking." Dawncurl hissed, azure stare hardening as she looked back to her clan, ears pinned.

"The less I know the better."

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Pretty proud of his chapter, especially Tigerstar's death. I haven't delved too much into Brinebloom yet, so I decided to dedicate this chapter to his POV so you guys could understand his thought process!

I'm literally so excited for you all to see how everything unfolds. I again wanted to mention how much I appreciate all the support, it truly means the world to me. As I was writing this, we actually hit 2k reads. Thank you so much. <3

chapter 19

"I'm not ready. Not even close. I'm the *farthest* thing from ready." Dawncurl vented as she sunk into her nest, tail curled around her dainty paws as Doveflutter placed her own on Dawncurl's, sage gaze encouraging.

"I don't know how you feel, so I'm not going to act like I do, but I know that you are fully capable of leading us." Doveflutter soothed, however she disregarded her words with a frustrated flick of her tail.

"No. No, I'm not fully capable. StarClan Dove, I'm scared."

"I'm sure every deputy has said the same thing as you at this very moment." Doveflutter lulled, and Dawncurl just shook her head aggressively.

"No, you don't understand. I have no idea how to lead." Dawncurl croaked as she tried to steady her breathing.

"I *know* you do."

"How can you be so sure?" Dawncurl mumbled, eyes fixated on her paws as she heard Doveflutter sigh from beside her.

"Because I've seen it before." The calico purred as she crawled closer to her and settled beside the white molly. "All the way back when we were in SpringClan, I would've never made it out of there without *you,* Dawncurl. You naturally took charge, and you managed to keep me calm in the process. You will be just fine."

"I hate you." Dawncurl responded as she dug her head into her paws, her mate chuckling from beside her.

"You love me."

"I can do both." The deputy mumbled. The two she-cats sat in a comfortable silence and Dawncurl could feel herself calming down,

though her thoughts weren't as kind to her. Her father was dead, and her brother killed him. She nearly wanted to laugh when she went over it in her head.

It wasn't funny, and she didn't think it was. It was tragic.

"Dawncurl?" A questioning voice called out. Dawncurl lifted her head to meet dim yellow eyes; Graypetal. Her former mentor stood by the entrance of the den, and she could feel Doveflutter nudging her cheek encouragingly.

"Are you ready?" The medicine cat queried, his voice solemn as he held her gaze. Dawncurl inhaled then exhaled, meeting her mate's sage gaze before looking back to Graypetal and nodding slowly.

"I'm ready." She replied, forcing out as much confidence as she could muster. Graypetal nodded and she padded towards him, Doveflutter following.

She was met by a small crowd of Leopardlune, Brinebloom, Risingpaw and Hiddenpaw.

"I can't believe my mentor is going to be the leader!" Her apprentice squealed, green eyes bright. Dawncurl narrowed her gaze on the lithe molly before flicking her shoulder playfully.

"Maybe you'll start listening to me now." Dawncurl mocked, Risingpaw nodding her head quickly as she beamed back up to her mentor.

"I wouldn't count on it."

"Oh I wasn't." She teased.

"I can't believe it D." Leopardlune spoke up next, golden eyes glaring in the descending sunlight. "I mean, I'm a little surprised. Always thought it was going to be me, but I'm proud of you." She purred.

"Thanks Leo." Dawncurl chuckled.

"But don't you dare start ordering me around, I'll keep you in your

place." Her friend then warned, a chilling glint lurking within her gaze until they softened. "Kidding- sorta."

"Good luck." Brinebloom spoke next, his voice much more fragile than that of the others. Dawncurl held his gaze for a few moments until he spoke again.

"I wish this could've happened in different circumstances. I'm sorry." He spoke again, however much quieter this time and only she could hear him.

"I am too." The deputy replied, voice completely apathetic. Another silence filled the air until Graypetal was by her side, a gentle look in his gaze.

"Ready to go?"

"Ready as I'll ever be, I suppose." Dawncurl sighed, giving her final farewells until she and Graypetal made the journey to Hallowed Cavern. They walked in complete silence and Dawncurl could only imagine what Graypetal was thinking.

She was young. She was inexperienced. She was the *least* qualified for the job, and everyone knew it. Now she had the entire clan within her paws, and now they were all her responsibility.

Finally they reached the mountain peak and Dawncurl could feel the air growing less dense. The rush of the churning waterfall sounded in the distance, burbling water humming in her ears.

Dawncurl followed Graypetal into a narrow cavern, her heart racing rapidly as the first streams of moonlight filtered the cave. The medicine cat led her to a small pool within the center, the water glowing brilliantly from the illuminating starlight.

"This doesn't feel real." She breathed out, finally breaking the silence. Graypetal sat by the tip of the pool before he finally looked at her, a warm smile crossing his face.

"I'm not going to lie to you Dawncurl, you're the youngest ascending deputy I've ever met or even heard of. However if you had been anyone else, I would be completely terrified. You have a good head

on your shoulders, and you will always have me to help guide you."

Dawncurl felt a smile tug at her face and she instantly felt eased by the medicine cat's words.

"That means so much to me."

"I'm glad." Graypetal spoke, nodding his head slowly. "You were my apprentice once, but to be honest with you, you feel more like a daughter to me."

If she hadn't been trained to conceal her emotions, Dawncurl was sure she'd be a sobbing mess from his words. It meant everything to her. It really did.

"Okay, we had our sappy moment. Let's get started." Graypetal spoke, and she nodded her head as she padded to the side of the calmed pool.

"It's simple, really. Clear your mind, relax your muscles and steady your breathing."

Easy? Dawncurl wanted to scoff, however she forced herself not to. Clearing her mind seemed absolutely impossible, however she settled down anyways. Dawncurl exhaled slowly, trying to focus on a single thought as she let her body ease.

"Now, all you need to do is dip your nose into the water. The rest will come naturally to you, and I'll meet you on the other side."

Dawncurl nodded before she looked into the tranquil water, swallowing all of her hesitation until she closed her eyes and dipped her nose into the gelid water.

She instantly felt something chilling wash over her, however she wasn't cold. It was a fresh feeling and she felt as though her entire body was weightless. This lasted a few moments until her paws were planted to a soft, nearly feathery-feeling floor beneath her.

Blue eyes opened to a bright light until she could slowly make out treetops and swaying leaves coated in vibrancy. Slowly, her vision cleared and Dawncurl felt her body stall as she was surrounded by

many familiar faces. Graypetal was beside her now, offering her a motivating smile.

"Welcome Dawncurl." A cat spoke up and Dawncurl met a pair of brilliant copper eyes.

Sunstar.

It was bittersweet and Dawncurl had to force herself to remain composed. She nodded to the previous leader, though she didn't miss the doubt which clouded his gaze.

"This is where I leave you now." Graypetal whispered gently in her ear, and Dawncurl only nodded until she felt his presence fade. The pale she-cat steadily stepped forward, meeting eyes of the cats she had known her whole life.

"Dawncurl," a gentle voice coed out, that of a small mottled she-cat — Flowerbee— as she sauntered over, "I'll be granting you your first life."

"Flowerbee." Dawncurl greeted, her gaze instantly falling on the now faded scar on the deceased deputy. The dainty little x mark held so much mystery. So much pain.

"Who did it? You have to tell me." She pleaded, and she didn't miss the look of anguish which lurked beneath her stare. Flowerbee sighed, ears pinning uncomfortably.

"I wish I could, but there is only so much the living is allowed to be given. You can't cheat at life." She explained, and Dawncurl had to bite her tongue to keep her retorts contained. However she didn't say anything, nearly flinching as Flowerbee rested her nose on her own.

"With this life, I give you compassion. Use it to empathize with your warriors, to treat them fairly and to listen to them, to understand and prioritize their needs just as much as your own." She spoke, nearly whispered, her voice almost a melody to Dawncurl's ears. She was instantly drowning in warmth, a nearly tender feeling devouring every inch of her. She felt so small, yet so protected. It

was the type of feeling which surrounded her whenever she was a kitten in the care of her mother, and a feeling she didn't know she missed so much until now.

As the overwhelming sensations subsided and Flowerbee was heading back to the assembled group, Dawncurl felt something nearly empowering take over her. With every new life given, she felt a surge of power, something so incredibly substantial. She could literally feel the new energy consume every inch of her, giving her a new sense of life all on its own.

Courage. Justice. Clear judgement. Honor. Patience. Loyalty. Strength. Each new life indulged her with an entirely new emotion of its own, swallowing her whole and releasing a newly crafted version of herself.

Dawncurl exhaled shakily, awaiting her eighth life patiently until her body seemed to freeze. Blue met blue in a profound, indescribable stare as she was approached by Bluegaze. She could feel guilt completely consume her and all she could do was stare at the approaching she-cat.

Bluegaze's eyes shone with youth as they once did before, however much more mature. She didn't seem angry. She didn't seem resentful. Instead, her cerulean gaze shone with benevolence.

"Bluegaze," Dawncurl rasped out solemnly, "I'm so sorry. I'm so, so sorry."

"I know you are." The blue-gray molly responded, her voice clear yet incredibly tender. Dawncurl nodded slowly, forcing away the tears which were forming at her waterline as the SpringClan molly embraced her.

"With this life, I give you forgiveness. When we are hurt, we want to lash out, and in the process we hurt those around us. I give you this life in hopes you will try to understand those who have wronged you, or who you have wronged yourself." Dawncurl nodded, her face nearly buried within soft blue fur until she was drowned in a miserable strain, the feeling of grief tearing through her. She wanted to scream, however she was unable to. It was a

feeling of pure despair and Dawncurl wanted nothing more than for the pain to end.

As it did, she could feel herself growing incredibly tired, her legs shaking beneath her. Bluegaze held her gaze for a few moments before she nodded slowly and headed back to the others.

Dawncurl was met by Sunstar once again, an unreadable expression within the previous leader's copper eyes.

"The only thing stronger than fear is hope, so with this life, I grant you just that; hope. Use it to not only hold faith within your clan, but yourself as well."

As his nose touched her's, Dawncurl felt every inch of her being, every little molecule completely freeze. Suddenly, she was free falling, her vision completely black. Every part of her felt like it was on flames, a multitude of emotions consuming her whole. Love. Hate. Envy. Guilt. Sorrow. Pain. It was as if she could feel it streaming into her, bleeding out through her eyes and leaving her hollow in its wake.

It was the most powerful thing she had ever felt. She could feel herself growing— metaphorically— this new sense of entitlement engulfing her.

Dawncurl opened her eyes as it all ended abruptly, her ears perked and eyes rounded as she started into Sunstar's gaze.

"I hail you by your new name, Dawnstar. Your old life is no more. You have now received the nine lives of a leader, and StarClan grants you the guardianship of FallClan. Defend it well; care for young and old; honor your ancestors and the traditions of the warrior code; live each life with pride and dignity."

It was the strangest feeling and Dawnstar couldn't even begin to explain it, nor did she have the time to as the StarClan cats began to fade and she was snapping back into her own reality. She awoke in Hallowed Cavern only to be met by the blazing yellow eyes of Graypetal.

"Welcome back."

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"Cats of FallClan, gather below the Highledge for a clan meeting."

The words felt foreign to her tongue. Truth be told, *everything* felt foreign. Dawnstar watched as her clan gathered below, many already by her side since the moment she and Graypetal arrived back home.

Her life still seemed so small. So ordinary. She felt so naive, as if she was nothing more than a child aimlessly trying— and failing— to unify her shattering clan.

"I know you must have your doubts." Dawnstar started slowly, exhaling as she looked down at their unreadable faces. "If I'm being honest with you, I have my own doubts. My father's death was unexpected to say the least, and I didn't know how quickly things would change overnight."

They shared no reaction, and Dawnstar had to force herself to stay calm. *Composure is strength,* she was always taught.

"But I have hope, and that is the only thing stronger than fear. I have hope that I'll be able to be the best I can possibly be. I have hope that I can lead us all into prosperity. I have hope that I will be able to prove myself to each and every one of you."

"I have no hope."

Dawnstar felt her body grow rigid, blue gaze narrowing to meet an icy depth from where Blossomfall's stare sent her silent daggers. She wasn't able to respond as the sable molly wasn't quite finished yet.

"We all condemn Ivystar for being inexperienced and arrogant. Now we're all hypocrites being lead by the biggest hypocrite of all."

"Bloss." Dawnstar heard Doveflutter hiss in warning, sage gaze tearing into her sister however Blossomfall didn't falter. Dawnstar straightened her posture, forcing the she-cat's words to remain completely neutral.
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"I didn't ask for this, but here I am, and here you are. We're all in this together now, and we cannot fall apart. Times are dire now, and the bond we share as a clan will be our biggest strength." Dawnstar tried to reason, however Blossomfall seemed not the least bit convinced.

"Dawnstar is your leader now, whether you like it or not. Put some respect on her name, and start acting like the warriors you were raised to be." Graypetal spoke up this time, and she offered him a grateful look.

"What about a deputy?"

Dawnstar glanced down to Goldenfell where she held his gaze. It was law that a deputy was chosen before the sun's final rays descended beyond the horizon, however Dawnstar wasn't entirely sure on who to choose for the rank.

"I will be postponing the election of a deputy." She spoke hesitantly and a chorus of disapproving voices instantly spoke up.

"That goes against the rules!" Lakelily yowled, his blue eyes boring into her. Dawnstar didn't respond as another wave of disagreements roared in her ears, anticipation rising in her chest.

"Silence!" She hissed, silencing the cats beneath her as she glared down at them. "Electing a deputy is a big deal, and one I want to go over thoroughly. I'm sure StarClan will understand."

Her clan seemed unconvinced, however it was enough to shut them up. Dawnstar dismissed them, watching in solitude as they gathered in groups, gossip instantly filling the air. It was all about her, she was sure of it.

As nightfall crept in, Dawnstar took her first steps into the leader's den, a desolate expression crossing her face. So many times she had been in this den as a guest, and now it was *her den.*

"It all feels too big, doesn't it?"

Dawnstar froze as a gentle voice spoke into her ears and she looked over to see Doveflutter beside her, instantly relaxing by the sight of

her mate.

"Extremely." Dawnstar whispered, almost to herself, as she stared into the dimly lit cavern. She suddenly had all this responsibility on her shoulders and she didn't know how to handle it. She was always guided by her father, and now she had no idea what to do. She relied on his praise and approval, and he wasn't even at her ceremony with StarClan.

"Me and Leopardlune got your nest prepared for you. I'm sure the journey from the cavern was long and you'd want your bed already made and ready for you when you got home." Doveflutter said softly as she made her way towards the freshly-woven nests, Dawnstar slowly following after her. She watched the lithe calico gently step onto her side and curl up, motioning for the newly-appointed leader to join her.

"Thank you." She murmured, eyes warm as she settled beside the brindled molly. They sat in a small silence for a little while, Doveflutter leaned up against her shoulder until Dawnstar broke the silence with a breathy exhale.

"I love you so much." She whispered, savoring the moment. Every minute seemed so valuable now, seeing how quickly things could change in just an instant.

Doveflutter glanced up, fluttering her laurel eyes as a sheepish grin crossed her face and she flicked her mate's face with her tail.

"You dork." She purred, a smug yet content gleam shining within her eyes. "I love you too."

"Promise me you won't die on me."

The words just slipped from her mouth, however Dawnstar didn't find herself regretting them. She didn't fail to notice the way Doveflutter's expression changed and the way she grew confused by the solicitation.

"I can't imagine what it's like," the calico started slowly as she let herself melt into Dawnstar's white fur, "losing both your parents so

suddenly and then being thrown into this huge authority where everyone is now your liability."

"Not comforting."

"Well obviously not." Doveflutter responded hastily, her voice a little more brisk than before. "But I promise that I will try my hardest to stay by your side for as long as I can."

"Good." Dawnstar murmured, her voice slowly getting drowsy and thick with exhaustion as she laid her head on her paws, Doveflutter's body keeping her warm.

"Because a life without you is a life not worth living."

chapter 20

'Cause you brought out the best of me
A part of me I'd never seen
You took my soul and wiped it clean
Our love was made for movie screens.

trigger warning
this chapter has a small mention of suicide.

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Hypnopompic; the state of consciousness leading out of sleep. It was a relishing moment, the kind Dawnstar wished to remain in. The beauty of peace. The protection of sleep against her troubled mind.

However life wasn't that kind to her. The pale white molly fluttered her blue eyes to the beginning rays of sunlight which promised her the genesis of a new day. Dawnstar looked down at the snoozing bundle of brindled fur beside her, placing a gentle lick on her sleeping mate's head.

She watched Doveflutter's eyelids flutter in elicit to her soft touch, a small grin crossing her face. Soon she'd have to leave the warmth of her mate's company and arrange the day's patrols as she hadn't chosen a deputy yet, though if it was her choice, she'd spend all day curled up beside the dainty calico.

"Dawnstar."

The leader lifted her head at the new voice, shushing the newcomer with a flick of her tail as she met a pair of golden eyes.

"Quiet please, she's sleeping." Dawnstar whispered, blue eyes traveling to Doveflutter's sleeping form until she looked back up to meet her friend's gaze.

"Sorry." Leopardlune nodded and the leader didn't miss the look of

anxiety which lurked beneath typically confident eyes.

"Are you okay?" Dawnstar queried, her voice falling concerned as she quickly examined the golden bengal. Leopardlune appeared fine, physically that is.

"Yeah, I'm okay." She nodded, falling quiet once more. Dawnstar tilted her head at this, waiting a little impatiently for her friend to speak, though she didn't.

"Just spit it out Leo. What's got you all anxious?" The words which left her mouth so carelessly were more insolent then she had hoped, and she could feel herself growing slightly guilty as Leopardlune flattened her ears.

"I'm not anxious, just a little..." Leopardlune trailed off, paws shuffling beneath her as she curled her tail around her paws. "A little shocked, that's all."

"Shocked?" Dawnstar questioned, however more to herself as she narrowed her gaze on the fidgeting molly ahead of her. "How so?"

"It's just," she exhaled slowly, "I thought it would be a no-brainer for you to choose me as your deputy."

Dawnstar couldn't contain the scoff which left her mouth, however she silently sweared at herself as Doveflutter shuffled beside her. It was typical and truth be told, she should've expected it from the egocentric bengal.

"Leopardlune, you've got to be kidding me."

"Well I'm not." She retorted, obviously mad and slightly embarrassed by Dawnstar's reaction. The leader took a moment to collect her thoughts, masking her annoyance so she didn't give her friend a not-too-friendly response.

"Leo, cats are already wary enough of my reign. They would take me as a complete joke if I assigned you as my deputy. For one, you're *younger* than me and for two, they would see it as clear bias."

Leopardlune was quiet for a moment, however Dawnstar relaxed as

it seemed to convince her, just slightly.

"It has nothing to do with you." Dawnstar then added, and this caused an instant reaction from her friend who gave her a disgusted look.

"Shocking, I know." The white molly then muttered under her breath, however the bengal was still able to hear.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Leopardlune hissed, her raised voice slowly waking the calico from her sleep but Dawnstar didn't even notice.

"It means that after everything I've been through, your biggest problem is that I didn't choose you as my deputy. Somehow you always manage to make *everything about you."*

Leopardlune went quiet and Dawnstar was preparing herself for the typical tantrum about to be screamed in her face, however she seemed much more upset than mad.

"That's not even the main thing I wanted to tell you, but maybe I shouldn't now. Don't want to make everything about me, you know."

Dawnstar looked into her doleful eyes, her heart sinking slowly. She was quiet for a moment, head shaking slowly. "I'm sorry Leo. Tell me, please."

Leopardlune didn't respond at first, however her narrowed gaze didn't once waver. Her expression was confusing to the leader, a mixture between anxiety and what seemed to be some type of euphoria.

"I'm switching ranks."

"Leo, you can't just switch ran-"

"I'm becoming a queen."

Dawnstar felt her mouth snap shut, eyes widening as she held the bengal's stiffening stare. She tried to respond, however she seemed

unable to. Was she happy for her friend? Was she mad? Dawnstar had no idea how to explain her feelings.

"Congratulations." Spoke a much lighter, sleep-engulfed voice as Doveflutter lifted her head from where she lay.

"Thank you." Leopardlune murmured, tail curling almost defensively around her stomach.

"So you're upset I didn't assign you deputy when you're pregnant?" The leader deadpanned, head titled. "The jokes speak for themselves." She said, though inaudible.

"It had nothing to do with me being pregnant or not, you still didn't know. It was the principle behind your decision, Dawnstar." Leopardlune spat back.

"*The principle*." Dawnstar echoed, and her friend didn't miss the mockery which lined her voice as she replied with her own scowl.

"Who's the father?" Dawnstar then queried, her voice a little more demanding than she would've liked. She knew it was a stupid question. She knew who the father was.

"Your brother."

"Since when were you two even together?"

"We aren't, well, we weren't." Leopardlune explained, somewhat jumbling her words until she sighed. "Look, it just kinda happened but I'm trying to be optimistic. I care about Brinebloom, and I care about my unborn kits."

"It just *kinda happened?"* Dawnstar hissed, nearly flinching when Doveflutter placed her tail on her agitated mate's shoulder.

"Yeah. You could show a little more compassion, you know, as my *best friend.* Or at least as their *aunt*." Leopardlune hissed in return, tail flickering in frustration.

"Just leave. I have things to do." Dawnstar spoke, completely ignoring the flicker of pain within her friend's gaze as she

reluctantly left.

"Really?"

Dawnstar looked down to see Doveflutter glaring up at her as she stood from beside her, quickly shaking away the sudden chills which resulted from her mate's fading warmth.

"What?"

"That was extremely uncalled for." Doveflutter explained, sitting up as well as she began to lick down her matted fur.

"So what? She's being careless?"

"She's bringing new life into the world— your nieces and nephews — and she's your *best friend.* How you acted was wrong. It was mean."

"You are the *last cat* allowed to judge me for being mean."

"StarClan Dawn, you're really bringing that up? I've apologized over and over. It was in the *past,* and this isn't even about me." Doveflutter spoke, her voice nearly a plea.

"Okay whatever." The white she-cat murmured, licking her paw and dragging it across her face as she looked back to the calico beside her. "I love you, but I have to arrange patrols and take Risingpaw out."

Doveflutter was quiet for a moment before sighing and nodding her head. "Okay. Just promise me you'll stop getting under everyone's fur?"

"Can't make any promises."

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"Did you know I caught a snake the other day? It was small, but I caught it! Fernpaw was rambling on about how I wouldn't be able to, you should've seen the look on her face. Priceless!" Risingpaw giggled, bouncing ahead of the others as her tail fluttered behind
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her.

"I'm very proud." Dawnstar responded, nodding her head curtly in approval as her apprentice narrowed her gaze on her.

"Remember when Redpaw challenged you to a race and you tripped over that root? Now *that* was priceless." Oceanpaw purred, Tealpool chuckling from beside her.

"Well I was totally winning before that happened." Risingpaw muttered, her ears flattening in embarrassment.

The four continued walking until reaching Needle Point, not being spared for a moment's silence as Risingpaw continued to ramble.

"Okay you two, we're going to have a friendly competition." Tealpool explained, his tail curling around his paws as the two apprentices sat in front of him.

"During mid new-leaf, Needle Point is crawling with prey. Before the sun reaches its peak, you two are going to catch as much prey as you possibly can. The one with the most caught prey is the winner." The sable tomcat spoke.

"Me and Tealpool will be evaluating, though you won't see us. Remember everything we taught you. Light on your paws, tail low, length calculation, tasting the air; these will all be helpful." Dawnstar explained, the two nodding in excitement until Tealpool sent them on their way.

Dawnstar followed her own apprentice, creeping through the low hanging vines and crawling through underbrush. Risingpaw excelled in hunting, and she was proving it even more as the leader watched.

She watched as the beige molly caught a dainty rabbit between her paws after a small chase then as she buried it underneath the ground to continue onto her next target, her body moving deftly through the pines.

However Dawnstar felt her body freeze as well as Risingpaw as a chilled scream filled the air. She felt glued in space for a few

fleeting moments before she stepped out of the underbrush to meet a confused Risingpaw.

"That sounded like my sister." Risingpaw spoke, the panic in her gaze far from comforting.

The two started heading in the direction of the scream and Dawnstar couldn't calm the rapid beating of her heart. As she followed after her apprentice, the two were relieved to see Tealpool and Oceanpaw alive and seemingly well.

However it wasn't until Dawnstar looked down to their paws that she felt her chest begin to tighten.

By their paws lay Hawkhowl, a clean cut scraped against his neck, his terrified gaze now glazed over in a hazy cloud. Though what freaked her out the most was the clean, freshly carved x marking implanted on his shoulder.

Dawnstar stared at the corpse for what seemed to be hours, her gaze finally looking up to Tealpool. His gaze was widened and she didn't miss the look of sheer terror in his eyes.

"This isn't happening." Oceanpaw muttered, her confused yet terrified stare looking at Dawnstar. "If Hawkhowl killed Flowerbee and Swanflutter in the same way, how is this possible?"

"Maybe he killed himself?" Risingpaw murmured softly, her eyes solemn as she sighed shakily.

"He definitely went out making a statement if so, but hey, at least we don't have to worry about anymore deaths." Oceanpaw spoke, trying her hardest to remain optimistic while Dawnstar was internally freaking out. *No, we do have to worry because Hawkhowl didn't kill them.*

*"*No, no, no..." Tealpool was muttering under his breath, resulting in Dawnstar offering him a comforting look though he seemed too dazed to even notice.

However now she had a much bigger problem. Her accused murderer was dead, and if another death occurred in the same

pattern, her story would fall into ruins and everyone would know she lied.

However Tigerstar was dead, and now she'd have to deal with the repercussions all on her own.

chapter 21

"We didn't detect anything at the border. Are you sure they're not bluffing? They're mad. They're angry. They're going to say things— do things— they don't really mean." Blossomfall explained, her ears perked as she wrapped her sable tail neatly around her paws.

"They're not bluffing. We all know how Ivystar is." Dawnstar muttered, not meeting any of the stares directed towards her.

"Plus, we killed one of their warriors. They're not going to let that go." Frostbird added in and the leader felt herself stiffen at the indirect mention of Bluegaze.

"To be fair, they attacked us first. Do we even know why? I thought Ivystar called a truce." Lionglare queried.

At his question, Dawnstar met Brinebloom's gaze warily, as if warning him to keep his mouth shut.

"Ivystar is young. She doesn't know what she's doing." Frostbird responded with distaste.

"Neither does Dawnstar." Blossomfall snickered under her breath, resulting in a warning glare from Doveflutter.

"Yeah Dawnstar, it's been weeks. When are you going to elect a deputy?" Goldenfell spoke up this time, the final cat in the meeting which was occurring in the leader's den.

"When I know who's best fit for the role, then I will decide." The pale white she-cat hissed. The gathered felines grew quiet at this until Lionglare spoke up.

"Let's talk about tonight. Are we going?"

"Would it be smart? Tensions are extremely high." Doveflutter responded, hesitance clear in her voice. Dawnstar finally looked up as they all directed their stares to her.

"Gatherings are a time of peace, so nothing bad should happen. We're going. We'd look weak not to." Dawnstar explained, tipping her chin in an attempt to appear confident.

"Great. Let's go to our enemy's home. Sleep in their dens. Let ourselves be vulnerable to them." Frostbird muttered.

"Our quarrel is with SpringClan and SpringClan only. Ivystar wouldn't call a full out war with the other two clans there." Lionglare reasoned, however Frostbird only offered him an unconvinced stare.

"Then it's settled; we're going. You can all come, bring your apprentices too." Dawnstar explained before nodding her head in dismissal. They all looked at each other blankly for a moment until leaving. All except Brinebloom.

"I'm staying. Leopardlune has been feeling really sick lately and I wanna be with her. Graypetal thinks it's two."

Dawnstar looked at her brother, a confused look crossing her face. "Two? Two what?"

"Kits."

"Oh." She murmured, an awkward silence filling the air. "Right. Yeah, you can stay. I'll bring Tealpool in your place."

"She misses you." Brinebloom added, almost hesitantly, as he began to leave the den. "I just thought you should know."

Dawnstar held his gaze momentarily. His blue eyes which were usually so cold— so distant— now yearning.

I miss her too, she thought. However Dawnstar wasn't able to say anything as Brinebloom left her alone.

I miss her too.

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"I'm bigger now, so if any of those SpringClan warriors try anything,
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I'll stop them dead in their tracks." Risingpaw boasted, green eyes shining in the dim moonlight.

"With what? Your inflated ego?" Redpaw grinned, however she wasn't as amused.

"It won't come to that." Dawnstar replied as she looked at the two apprentices, however she didn't miss the flicker of disappointment in both their eyes.

"Are you sure?" Doveflutter whispered, and she met her mate's worried gaze, her own softening.

"It won't, I promise."

"I'm really nervous. It's stupid, I know, but it's just," Doveflutter exhaled shakily, "we haven't been there since the battle, it just brings back a lot of bad memories with Sunstar's death and the whole kidnapping thing..."

Dawnstar looked into sad, vulnerable sage gaze. She couldn't tell if she felt more bad for her mate, or more angry towards SpringClan for emotionally scarring them both.

"Your feelings are valid. It's not stupid." Dawnstar soothed as she nudged her cheek softly. "I'm scared too."

Doveflutter looked at her until she nodded her head in reluctance. They spent the entire walk in silence, just melting in the presence of one another as Dawnstar drowned out the conversations of her clan behind her.

This was her first gathering as leader, and every time it crossed her mind it only freaked her out more. As the familiar tang soaked her nose, Dawnstar only forced herself to swallow her fear. *Weakness. Fear is weakness. That's what dad would tell you.*

It was surreal now. Dawnstar looked behind her shoulder to her assembled clan, the seconds following nearly eating her alive until she signaled them to follow her into SpringClan's camp.

It seemed as if all the chattering from the other clans stilled, their

eyes all boring into her and her entering clan before the questions started rising into the air.

"A new leader every gathering."

She heard someone mutter, however she only drowned it out. It wasn't any of their business.

Dawnstar watched as her clan dispersed out to talk to the other clans, her blood roaring in her ears. What was she going to say? *Oh yeah, FallClan is great. I mean, our leader of what? Not even a full season? Is already dead. We have a rampant murderer on our paws. We're on the brink of a war- but it's okay. We're all okay. FallClan is just great.*

"You have a lot of nerve showing up here."

Dawnstar froze as a voice traveled into her ears, twisting around to meet painfully familiar eyes; Creamlily.

"It's the gathering. We're supposed to go, but then again you guys aren't much for rules, are you?" She scoffed.

"I wouldn't be talking if I were you." Creamlily retorted and Dawnstar could swear she was getting ready to pounce. Instead of replying, she just held her gaze, for several painfully long seconds she just held her gaze. Finally, Creamlily flattened her fur, though her eyes were still just as deadly.

"That dog attack killed my sister. Her name was Flurryfall." She spoke in hushed whispers, however her words were so incredibly clear. "Bluegaze was her apprentice. She loved her like a daughter, and she was all I had left of my sister. Your clan," Creamlily paused, her bottom lip nearly quivering, "your clan completely *mauled* her body. She was hardly even recognizable."

Dawnstar closed her eyes for a few moments, though each word sent tiny knives to her heart. *It wasn't supposed to happen,* was all she could think, and though she tried to put it into words, they just got caught in her throat.

"Let me tell you this," Creamlily began, "you will pay for it. I can

promise you that. Maybe not today, no, but tomorrow. The next day. The day after that. Watch your back." Creamlily warned, each word just as threatening as the rest. *"Watch your back."* She emphasized again.

The warrior's hot breath in her face caused everything in her body to chill and Dawnstar didn't even realize she was holding her breath until Creamlily backed off.

Though she wasn't left to wallow in it for long as she watched the other three leaders begin to gather upon the Highledge. Now she was consumed of entirely new nerves as she made her way towards them, repeating in her head what she was going to say, over and over.

Fallowstar spoke first, though she didn't really listen. She heard a few bits here and there, something about new kits and how well SummerClan was thriving. *Must be nice.*

"Luckily the last winter has been more forgiving than others, though new-leaf has treated us well too." Viperstar spoke up, his voice soft. "Though I do advise you all to be wary, the seasonal twolegs are back in their nests. They always come around this time."

"We're very aware." Ivystar spoke up and Dawnstar felt herself still. Was she going to bring up the dog attack? Surely not, it would make SpringClan appear weak with such a heavy blow.

"We were attacked by a dog, though it was no accident. It was lead to us by *FallClan."* Cicadasong accused, and ripples of shocked voices echoed in her ears, some from her own clan.

"Dawnstar, is this true?" Goldenfell breathed out, however she wasn't able to answer. All she wanted was to sink into the floor and completely blink out of existence, but that wasn't really an option.

"You didn't even tell your clan about your schemes? Must mean you're really guilty about it, hm? And since when were you leader anyways? Oh that's right," Ivystar paused as a malicious grin crossed her face, "your dad never got his nine lives. You let that slip up at the border scuffle where your clan killed one of my members.

She had just become a warrior. She had her whole life ahead of her and your clan killed her."

"That's not even fair." Dawnstar hissed in return, trying to drain the desperation out of her voice. *Composure, you have to stay composed.* "You attacked us first. Your warriors kept me restrained as they tried to kill my father. It was self defense and you know it."

"That was all me." Harvestleaf spoke up this time, a nearly maddening glint in his gaze. "Bluegaze never touched your father once, yet she had to pay the price. You had no honor."

"You have no right to talk to me about honor. You lost that privilege the day you killed Sunstar." Dawnstar snarled, her tail lashing lividly.

"Actually," Creamlily grinned as she fluttered her eyes to meet the FallClan leader's, "that was me."

"Well I hope your proud of yourself." Dawnstar replied, her voice evening out. Silence filled the air and she didn't miss the looks of disgust which came from even her own clan.

"FallClan is not welcome in my home." Ivystar then spoke up, gasps erupting quietly from below. Dawnstar met her blazing green gaze, eyes flickering from each one until she straightened her posture.

"You don't have to ask me twice. It smells like rat's bile in here anyways." She spoke, forcing out confidence as she began to step down from her place at the Highledge. Dawnstar gathered up her warriors until looking back to the other leaders, her eyes nothing but passive.

"FallClan is thriving too, and that's all you need to know." She warned, her voice uncanny as she glared at the SpringClan leader. "Be smart Ivystar."

chapter 22

You taught me the courage of stars before you left
How light carries on endlessly, even after death
With shortness of breath
You explained the infinite
And how rare and beautiful it is to even exist.

trigger warning
extreme description of gore.

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She was on edge. She was *constantly* on edge. Her mind was unforgiving, constantly keeping her awake at night. Sometimes she could calm the storm of thoughts in her mind as she set her focus on Doveflutter sleeping, her chest rising and falling delicately in her sleep enough to ease her.

Though her worries were sometimes too strong that not even Doveflutter's comforting presence could tame them.

Days were passing, sometimes quickly, sometimes painfully slow. The days were growing longer and tensions were increasing, especially within the dynamics of her own clan.

Cats were constantly nagging at her for not choosing a deputy, though a deputy was the *least* of her concerns. She liked being in control of it all. She liked control.

Days were falling into routines again, strict and orderly routines. She would wake up, eat breakfast with her mate, arrange patrols, train Risingpaw and then stare at the nursery as she mentally fought herself on whether or not to check up on her friend and the unborn kits which resided within her growing belly.

Then the impending war was another stressful factor. Ever since the gathering, Dawnstar had been sending out double patrols, many she

went on herself. Sometimes she'd even catch herself falling asleep at Fishcape while guarding.

Luckily, no more deaths were happening. She had always thought in the back of her mind that it was Tigerstar behind it all, but now that could no longer be true, seeing as Hawkhowl had died after her father's death. Maybe she'd never know who was behind it all.

Though somewhere within it all, it was as if Dawnstar had lost the joy of life, she supposed. She always felt like she was drowning, only ever finding moments to breathe so rarely. Sometimes she found herself mentally cursing at her father for burdening her with such a tedious rank so young then dying on her so early.

She was a good fighter, sure, but not leader. She knew that. Everyone else knew that.

Though she was finally able to bring out some joy to her clan. A small effort, but something nonetheless. Just the day before, Dawnstar and all the other mentors had arranged a final assessment for the apprentices as they had reached their twelfth moon, in which they all passed.

Things had been slow, however she was sure a meeting could bring some clarity, so Dawnstar didn't hesitate as she found herself approaching the Highledge.

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather here beneath the Highledge for a clan meeting!" Her voice rang out, though it had only dawned on her that this was her first official meeting as a leader.

To her left she saw Silverpool lapping mercilessly at Fernpaw's coat, Hiddenpaw beside her as she stared excitedly at her sister.

On her right, she saw Frostbird gathering her four kits— including her own apprentice— as she fixed a few strands of fur on their own coats.

"Today we have five apprentices ready to become warriors. Fernpaw, Redpaw, Oceanpaw, Shadepaw and Risingpaw, please

step forward." As the words left her mouth, she watched the group of five stumble forward, some so eager they tripped over their own paws- Risingpaw being one of them.

She started with the eldest of the group, Fernpaw, letting the ceremonial words roll off her tongue so easily for her first time. Fernflicker was the name she had settled on, in regards to her fiery spirit.

Next was Redpaw, soon Redgrowl, then Oceanmist and Shadeheart. Watching as each of them got so excited was enough to bring a smile to her own face, almost as if this ceremony was the silver lining her clan so desperately needed.

Though this next was a little more special to her. Dawnstar looked down to a beaming Risingpaw, her green eyes nearly sparkling in the sunlight as the leader motioned her forward.

"I, Dawnstar, leader of FallClan, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on this apprentice. They have trained hard to understand the ways of your noble code, and I commend them to you as a warrior in their turn."

For a moment, she let her apprentice soak up every moment, every second. It was a big deal becoming a warrior. It brought Dawnstar back to her own ceremony.

"Risingpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend your clan, even at the cost of your life?"

"Yes! Yes! I do!"

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior name. Risingpaw, from this moment on you will be known as Risingflame. StarClan honors your loyalty and willpower, and we welcome you as a full warrior of FallClan."

As they touched noses, Dawnstar instantly felt as though she was finally coming up for fresh air. She needed this just as much as they did.

As excitements died down and the newly-announced warriors

prepared for vigil, Dawnstar watched from her den as her clan went on about their lives. She watched as her brother grabbed a mouse from the fresh-kill pile and headed straight to the medicine cat den, letting her thoughts consume her until they was interrupted.

"Blossomfall has been very vocal about her," the voice hesitated, "disapproval of your leadership."

Dawnstar glanced up to meet sage eyes, however she didn't miss the flicker of frustration beneath them.

"Then put her in charge. See how well she does." The leader only grumbled, ready to be embraced by her mate however Doveflutter kept her distance.

"She's always been so much more closer with Tealpool, you know? Growing up she always loved him more, and she didn't hide it." Doveflutter then went on to explain and this grabbed a puzzled look from Dawnstar.

"I was always the misfit between my siblings, so when she comes to me and she's," Doveflutter paused again, "*concerned* about me, it just means a little more."

"Why is she concerned?" As the question left her lips, Dawnstar and Doveflutter shared a chillingly uncanny stare, one that made the calico shuffle nervously.

"She's just skeptical. You know how she is..." Doveflutter went on to explain, however her voice was caving and growing delicately quiet as she looked at her paws.

"What is she skeptical of?" The questions were growing more demanding and Dawnstar couldn't shake her annoyance as the calico continued to walk on eggshells.

"Of you. How you treat others. Your emotional stability..."

"Excuse me?" Dawnstar hissed, however her mate remained the same. The leader then brought her gaze to the sable warrior, perched at the warriors' den with Lionglare and Nightglow. "My emotional stability? I've lost my parents, she could be a little

understanding."

"Bloss, well, she isn't really the understanding type..."

"Stop mumbling! StarClan Doveflutter, at least you could defend yourself as an apprentice without cowering!" Dawnstar raised her voice to a near yell, one which resulted in her mate looking around in embarrassment.

"Defend myself?" Doveflutter questioned, nearly to herself, though as she finally met Dawnstar's gaze, her green eyes were enlarged and much more livid. "Defend myself from what? I'm just explaining to you that your own clan has had doubts about you from the start and you aren't doing anything to *fix it!* I'm sorry D, but promoting a couple warriors isn't going to make everyone else forget all the responsibilities you're completely neglecting!"

As the words left the calico's mouth, Dawnstar just shook her head, mumbling a few inaudible words until she looked back to her mate. "You mean *your* doubts in me?"

"I never said that. Don't put words in my mouth." Doveflutter replied, and though she was much more composed, she was clearly growing angry as well.

"You didn't have to say anything. It's clear enough." Dawnstar muttered, her blue gaze traveling to the sky which was a coloration of dark orange and a purplish-blue as nightfall settled in.

"Okay fine, I'm skeptical too. But what else do you want to feel? You haven't elected a deputy and you're not even trying to bond with your clanmates or assure them that you have everything under control."

"Because I don't have everything under control!" Dawnstar nearly screamed, not even noticing the questionable stares which were being sent her way from her clanmates.

"Maybe because you aren't allowing anyone to help you! You're pushing everyone away who loves you, and now you're pushing me away! I'm your *mate,* and you don't get to get mad at me for holding

you accountable for not doing your job!"

"Because I can't trust anyone! I thought I found trust in you, but you're clearly not on my side-"

"Dawnstar, there are no sides-"

"No let me finish." Dawnstar snarled, her face so alarmingly close to Doveflutter's as her hot breath brushed her face. "You have no *idea* what's going on in my head, or my struggles."

"Then *tell me*. Let me help you!" The frustration in Doveflutter's voice had completely vanished, and now she was just pleading for some kind of vulnerability.

"I don't want your help, and I don't need it." Dawnstar concluded after a few moments of silence, her own anger completely subsiding as she straightened her posture. Doveflutter didn't respond, so the leader took this moment to look out to her clan. They were all starring at the quarreling couple, however they all looked away as if they had been minding their own business the whole time.

All except Blossomfall.

Dawnstar didn't miss the deadly gleam which glistened so terrifyingly within her azure gaze. Though completely silent, the message was clear enough, but Dawnstar was not going to play by her rules.

She wasn't going to be defied.

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"Thank you for walking with me. It means a lot." Leopardlune spoke, her voice almost a whisper.

"Thank you for inviting me." The leader responded, offering her a soft glance before looking towards the blossoming flowers which lined the path they followed. "Honestly, I think putting all the stress away is helping. I know I can't run from it forever, but small escapes are nice."
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"I can't imagine what it's like." Leopardlune responded, offering her a sympathetic stare. "On the bright side, we can relate to the fact that we're both being placed in these situations where we have no idea what we're doing- not that I'm saying my struggles are anywhere in comparison to your's, but-"

"Leo, don't talk down upon yourself. How I've been treating you is wrong," Dawnstar paused for a small moment, "and I'm sorry."

"Good. Because these kits are going to need a godmother."

"I'm honored." The white she-cat purred, the two sharing a small laugh as they neared camp until Dawnstar spoke again.

"Have you thought of any names?"

Leopardlune was quiet for a moment, as if thinking about the question before responding. "A little, yeah. But me and Brinebloom decided to wait until they're born. I guess I'm hoping it'll be that moment where the names just naturally come to you."

"Well, Dawnkit is a very pretty name if I must say." Dawnstar grinned.

"Really? I was thinking Leopardkit one and Leopardkit two." The bengal beamed in return and they just smiled at each other.

The two walked the rest of the way home in silence, just enjoying the company of one another. For the first time in a long time, Dawnstar felt like she was actually going to be okay. Doveflutter was right; she is surrounded by cats who loved her and cats willing to help her through the rough spots.

However as the neared camp, they both halted as the acrid tang of blood tainted both their noses, both sharing a grimacing stare until Dawnstar noticed a bloodied flower on the ground, almost as if it had been painted.

"What in StarClan's name?" Leopardlune muttered until she looked forward, a small gasp leaving her mouth. "D look, it's a trail."

As she spoke, Dawnstar glanced in the same direction to see a trail

of flowers, each one colored in drying blood. Sharing uneasy stares, they both continued forward hesitantly.

She could feel the low rising of panic begin to bubble in her chest as they followed the trail, mentally preparing herself for the sight. They seemed to walk for ages and every step felt like more weight forcing her forward yet dragging her back.

The bloodied flower trail grew into more of a combination of fur and flowers until they finally reached the end.

It was a sight so abhorring, something she instantly knew would never leave the depths of her mind.

Denial was her first thought. Her whole entire life seemed to instantly pause, as if some glitch. It was a state she never knew she could even experience, and something which numbed her from the shock.

Not just shock, but pain. Relentless, daunting pain.

She didn't even hear Leopardlune screaming beside her. She didn't even acknowledge the look of sheer terror within the bengal's gaze. She didn't feel her friend vigorously shaking her to snap out of whatever trance she was involuntarily glued in.

Not real. This isn't real.

This isn't real.

This isn't real.

It was real.

It was so incredibly real.

"Doveflutter." She finally gasped out, however her voice was nearly a croak, a pathetic excuse of some kind of yearn.

She looked down at her mate, her dainty body mangled in ways which made everything in her stomach completely churn. Doveflutter's stomach was entirely shredded open, guts completely

sprawled outside of her body which was soaked in blood. Her neck was entirely gapped open, leaving her utterly hollow and one of her ears was entirely gone, nowhere to be seen. Her laurel eyes, usually so bright and warm, now clouded over yet the terror she had felt was so clearly evident. She was surrounded in a circle of the bloodied flowers, and by her head was a patch of her flesh. It was the only part of her not drenched in blood.

Except one thing. The patch of flesh and fur held one thing that made it all so much more appalling.

The x marking.

Leopardlune's screams were growing more desperate, more forcible and more hysteric and Dawnstar didn't notice the approaching form of Brinebloom and Lakelily and the way their jaws instantly dropped.

"Doveflutter." She whispered again, her eyes frantically looking over every inch of her nearly unrecognizable body. "Wake up, love." She whispered as she crouched by her body, the burning tang of blood stinging every inch of her nose.

"Dawnstar..." She heard Lakelily mumble as her senses began to return to her.

"Hush. I'm waking her up." She whispered again, offering them a small smile and ignoring Lakelily's horrified stare as Brinebloom focused on calming a horrified Leopardlune.

"Dove, love. Wake up." She spoke once more, her voice growing louder.

"Doveflutter."

"Doveflutter!" Dawnstar screamed, her eyes wide in horror as it was finally all dawning on her, all at once. So rapidly. So mercilessly.

"We have to help her!" She screamed again, this time in Lakelily's face who only looked at her in hopeless sympathy.

"It's okay love," Dawnstar whispered as she crouched by her once

again, "we'll help you." She whispered in her single ear as she grabbed her mate's scruff and began dragging her to the entrance of camp.

"Dawnstar." Brinebloom spoke, his voice hard yet his eyes held nothing but sorrow for his sister.

"Shut up and *help me!* We have to take her to Graypetal!" She yelled, her voice muffled and so agonizingly painful as she dragged her home. Lakelily and Brinebloom looked at each other hesitantly before nodding and helping her carry Doveflutter's completely disfigured body to camp.

"Graypetal! Graypetal!" She screamed as they dragged her body into camp, completely ignoring the crowd of cats surrounding her as they all broke out into hysterics.

She felt relief drown every inch of her body as Graypetal dipped his head out of the medicine cat den and approached her, Hiddenpaw trailing behind him with herbs stashed within her mouth. However both the medicine cats halted abruptly as they stared at the scene.

The now bloodied leader stood over Doveflutter's gnarled body, her intestines dragging from her opened stomach and leaving a bloody trail from the entrance to camp all the way to the centre.

"Don't just stand there, do your job and *help her!"*

Graypetal took a moment to swallow his own food which was creeping up his throat and collected himself as he slowly approached her, his eyes nothing but apologetic.

"Dawnstar, she's dea-"

"Don't say it. Don't you *dare* say it."

"She's gone. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." He spoke, his voice so frustratedly gentle and pain-stricken.

"No. No. No. StarClan *help her! Help her now!"* She demanded, her voice completely faltering as her demands grew into pathetic pleas. "Anyone *please!"* She begged, looking around at her surrounding

clanmates who all looked at her with the same apologetic stares.

"You lied to me! You said you wouldn't leave me. You lied!" She vented as she fell back to her mate's side, her breaths growing hitched as she began to hyperventilate.

"*You lied to me."*

chapter 23

Look how you found me
A broken part enough for two
For me and you
Just reminiscence of the best parts of my youth
I wish I was her for good

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She felt calm. She really shouldn't feel calm, but she did.

Dawnstar stared at her reflection within a small rill which streamed through camp, her fur still covered in her dead mate's dried blood.

It was a strange feeling, one she couldn't even begin to put into words. She felt hollow, completely and utterly hollow.

The ichor-stained molly sat there for a long time, eyes tracing over every inch of herself in the distorted water. She looked shattered.

Swanflutter would probably make this some kind of philosophical lesson and Dawnstar nearly laughed at the thought.

After a few more moments, she dipped herself into the cool water, letting it lap at her fur as the water turned completely crimson. Whenever even a small part of Doveflutter entered her mind, the leader would completely block it out, forcing every single memory away. It was like her own mental painkiller.

As she was cleaned, she let the sun's warmth dry her pale coat as she made it back to camp to be met by concerned clanmates.

They were probably expecting her to shut everyone off again, to completely isolate herself the way she did when her mom died.

She was weaker back then. Now, she would continue with life. If she kept herself busy, she wouldn't have to think, because if she let herself think, she would be setting herself up for another

breakdown.

She just wanted release.

Dawnstar entered her den, looking at the nest beside her own where her mate would sleep. She didn't wait for long as she instantly found herself putting the two nests together to make a single one.

Like she never existed. It's easier that way.

Dawnstar curled up in her nest, welcoming any and all rest until a voice traveled into her ears.

"We need to talk."

She looked up to see apathetic blue eyes glaring back to her and the leader grumbled inaudibly as she sat up and stared at her brother.

"Can it wait? I'm busy."

"No." He responded and far too urgently for her liking. They stared at each other for a moment until she sighed in reluctance and Brinebloom continued talking.

"I've never once questioned you. I've never once doubted you. I want to make that extremely clear." He began.

"Continue."

"The day you confessed that Hawkhowl killed our mother, I never questioned you. I believed you. I never questioned you the day Bluegaze confronted you about the dog attack and your part in it, even though your submission was enough to prove you were complicit. I never questioned your morals. I never questioned your judgement."

Dawnstar listened intently to every word, her head twisting in an almost demeaning manor.

"You do now?"

"Yeah Dawn, I do." He spoke, the edge on his voice far from

comforting. "You see, there's a plot hole in your story."

"Excuse me? *Plot hole?* My *story?"*

"Yes. You said Hawkhowl killed mom, you said you saw it with your own eyes. The others were all killed in the same way, painting Hawkhowl as their killer too. Now, Doveflutter is dead in the exact same way and yet, our accused murderer is dead as well, long before she was."

Dawnstar felt every fur stick up on her back as his words left his mouth and it had completely lacked to hit her that he was right, so she instantly went the defensive route.

"How insensitive can you be? You think you can come in here, throwing around accusations and proceeding to bring my dead mate into it all? Have you lost your mind? You really think you have the audacity, or are you just delusional?" Each word was laced with vicious malice, though her entire body was fighting off her own fear. Had they others made the same connection?

"You don't get to escape this Dawnstar. I'm sorry Doveflutter's dead, she was my friend too, but we need to talk about this. What *really* happened?"

"No, no I don't have to discuss *anything* with you! You're the last cat who gets to accuse me of anything when you killed dad."

Brinebloom's eyes flickered with a bit of horror at her words, though he instantly brushed it aside as he exhaled. "Yes. I did, and I admitted it. You could do the same."

"I have nothing to admit. Are you trying to accuse me of something?" Dawnstar queried, her voice condescending as she sent him silent daggers with her eyes.

"I don't know. I'm just saying that something isn't adding up." Brinebloom retorted.

The two held each other in a long, intense stare. Neither blinked and Dawnstar felt as though everything around her would break if she even breathed the wrong way.

For a moment, Dawnstar felt like her whole life was shattering, and she couldn't tell what she was hearing, or seeing or feeling.

It wasn't until frantic chattering outside her den erupted that she and Brinebloom were immediately outside with their clanmates who were met by a frightened Tealpool, his eyes widened.

"What is going on?" Brinebloom murmured under his breath.

"Tealpool, you don't look so goo-" Nightglow was cut off.

"Make it stop! Make it stop!" Tealpool was screaming, curled up completely in a ball of shivering fur, his claws digging into the ground beneath him.

"Make what stop?" Blossomfall spoke, a hint of concern in her tone.

"What's wrong with him?" Leopardlune murmured to Lionglare who only shrugged.

"Where's Graypetal?" Frozenlily questioned.

"He went out to collect some herbs, I don't know when he'll be back." Hiddenpaw responded, her own voice a little shaky.

"Well your his apprentice, you should know something. Fix him." Blossomfall hissed.

"I, um, I've never seen anything like this..." Hiddenpaw responded, her eyes flickering from Blossomfall to Tealpool.

"It was me. It was me. It was me." Tealpool then began to chant under his breath as he stared at his paws, gaze completely unwavering.

"What was you? You're not making any sense." Dawnstar spoke, nearly whispered, as she sat down by him.

"Me. I did it. But you have to understand, the voices. The voices!" He was nearly begging now, looking at her with pleading eyes, like he was yearning for some kind of absolution.

"I'm not a bad cat. You have to understand Dawnstar, please tell me you understand." Tealpool whispered, his voice giving in and out.

"He's crazy." Leopardlune blurted out, which resulted in a disgusted look from Lionglare and a warning glare from Brinebloom.

"It was like I could see myself, but I couldn't control it. Like I could see, and feel, but I couldn't stop. *Something* was pulling me! You know? Tell me you know what I'm saying!" Tealpool began rambling over his own words, letting out little whimpers and coughs between them.

"He's sick. There's something wrong with him." Blossomfall hissed, looking back to Hiddenpaw. "Don't just *stand there,* do something!"

Hiddenpaw looked at her with widened eyes before nodding frantically and rushing towards the medicine cat den.

"The blood. There was so much blood. It was everywhere. I couldn't get it off. It wouldn't get off. I tried so hard..." Tealpool trailed off once more, his ears pinned to his skull.

"Blood? What blood?" Frozenlily queried as she gave Dawnstar a questioning stare as little pieces fell together, one by one.

"I did it." The shivering tomcat whispered again.

"Did what? What did you do, Tealpool?" Blossomfall questioned, her voice nearly breaking as she laid down right in front of him before she gave Dawnstar a knowing yet terrified look.

"I killed them. I killed every single one of them." He whispered, his shivering finally stopping as he grew uncomfortably still, his breathing starting to become labored.

Dawnstar couldn't stop the train wreck of thoughts which completely collided in her mind as she stared into his eyes. Tealpool's gaze, once terrified and frantic, seemed much more calmed and composed as he exhaled shakily.

"I couldn't control it. I can't explain it. Just like I can't explain this." Tealpool whispered once more as he opened his paw to reveal half-

eaten deathberries.

"No!" Blossomfall screeched right as Hiddenpaw arrived with her herbs, the apprentice's gaze completely widened in horror as she dropped the herbs and ran to him. Dawnstar watched in silent terror as Hiddenpaw forced him to his side, her paw reaching into his throat in a hopeless attempt to dislodge the berries he had eaten. However it was pointless, and Hiddenpaw slowly stepped away from a dying Tealpool.

Everyone grew uncomfortably silent as he stopped fighting for his life and the remaining berries slipped out of his paw, his chest rising and falling so delicately.

"The voices. It was the voices." He whispered again, his eyes fluttering open one last time as he looked at his only remaining sister. "I love you Bloss."

"Shut up." She half-hissed yet half-cried, her ears pinned as she placed her paw on his while Tealpool took his final breaths.

Dawnstar stared at Brinebloom, their eyes almost having a silent conversation.

However she wasn't sure if it was a "I told you so″ type stare, or a "we have a major problem" type stare.

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Somewhat long author's note coming up, you don't have to read if you don't want to!

Firstly, I didn't pull this idea out of my ass of Tealpool being the murderer. I promise there's more to it haha!

And just wanted to say, despite all cliches, the main part of this story is Dawnstar and her leadership, however her childhood and young adulthood played a big role into why she was the way she was, and way she deals with specific situations the way she does. I wish I could've had the time to flesh it out more, but her experiences pre-leadership are just as important and needed to be known. If I went down every plot line I had planned originally, this

would be over a hundred chapters long and quite frankly, I don't think anyone wants to read that.

I promise I didn't want to follow a more "cliche" route, however her leadership is the main focal point. I would've started the story with her as leader, but then all her motives wouldn't make sense. I just wanted to clear that up on why she became deputy so early, and why I followed a more common trope!

chapter 24

A full moon had passed since Doveflutter's death and Tealpool's confession.

The interrogation which followed after was stressful and long, however Dawnstar was able to cover up the huge gap in her story.

"I was incoherent. I wasn't in my right mind. Hawkhowl and Tealpool look so similar and I was so distraught, I could've sworn it was him."

"It was an honest mistake."

"The moon was hidden beneath the clouds. It was dark. I couldn't see that well."

It took a lot of unconvincing glares, repetitive questions and a long, long talk to get her council to believe it, but they eventually did.

For whatever reason, the world was mad with her. Dawnstar wasn't sure why, but everything was falling out of place.

The past moon had been rather peaceful, however her mind wasn't. It was the very opposite, actually.

A comforting prospect could be the birth of her niece and nephew; Cranekit and Stonekit. Dawnstar had visited them the day after their birth. Cranekit was the eldest and she looked just like her father. Stonekit was the smaller of the two and he seemed to be a mixture of both his parents' coat colors.

Leopardlune seemed pleased, and even Brinebloom seemed overly satisfied at being a father. Her brother wasn't much for showing emotion, but he didn't hide his love for them.

She was happy for them, but Dawnstar couldn't shake the envy which churned inside of her. Whenever she looked at the happy family, all she could think about was what she didn't have.

Her and Doveflutter had mentioned kits before. It was something they both wanted, however in the future, when they were both much older.

Not only that, but now her brother and her best friend wouldn't have any time left for her with their new family. Moreover, Brinebloom and Leopardlune had each other now and Dawnstar couldn't help but feel that she would be irrelevant to them at this point.

She couldn't help but think about her mother's words to her when she was just a kit, something Dawnstar hadn't even thought about since the moment Swanflutter told them to her.

"Not all are as blessed as you. Not all are born into love, but you were. Don't take advantage of that."

Yet here she was, all alone, losing all the love she was born with. She *did* take advantage of it, and she hated herself for it.

More than anything she wanted to be back in her mother's comforting embrace, hearing her advice, even just to have her smell again was something Dawnstar so desperately yearned for. She wasted her mother's final moons on trying to impress her father and she could only blame herself for it.

Dawnstar looked out to her clan from the Highledge, her ears pinned as she observed them. She watched as Risingflame shared tongues with Fernflicker and Hiddenpaw. Outside the warriors' den, Goldenfell and Lionglare were laughing with Frozenlily and Meadowlark. She watched as Brinebloom padded into the nursery with a rabbit in his jaws to greet his mate. Lastly, she watched Nightglow sitting beside Blossomfall, the two seemingly deep in a conversation though Dawnstar didn't miss the comforting licks Nightglow gave the grieving she-cat.

Everyone had someone. Dawnstar had no one.

After giving her clanmates a final glance, she headed for the exit of camp, glad to be surrounded by the serenity of the pines which greeted her. She wasn't sure where she was going, or how long she

had been walking, she just let her paws guide her as her thoughts ran on repeat in her mind.

Dawnstar halted as the gentle rustle of foliage gently hummed in her ears, a single ear flickering as she glanced around. She was still in FallClan territory, however at the very edge which bordered unclaimed territory.

The white molly glanced around warily, her claws instantly unsheathing as her tail lashed vigorously. "Show yourself coward." She snarled.

"Coward? No, not me. I think I'm actually quite the daredevil." A rather light, airy voice spoke up. "It's just, I'm not *too* big on combat because for one, I'm sure you'd definitely hand me my tail and two, I haven't done anything remotely close to fighting- well no that's a lie, I fought a beetle one time. Very dangerous. I only recommend the strongest take on one of those guys."

Dawnstar fell silent as she was met by a sandy beige tomcat with the brightest green eyes. As her silence grew longer and continuously more awkward, the tomcat chuckled lightly as he sat down, tail wrapping around his paws.

"So now that we've discussed that I'm actually not a coward— because that's obviously a *very important* topic to discuss— why don't you tell me your name?" He grinned. He had one of those charming smiles that made Dawnstar want to puke.

"Dawnstar."

"Dawn star?"

"No, Dawnstar, you say it together. No pause."

"Dawnstar. Got it. Interesting name." He nodded as he fluttered his eyes back to her. "I'm Luca."

"Well Luca, sorry to spoil the party but you're trespassing."

"No, I'm not." Luca responded, a nearly confused look crossing his face before he replaced it with a nearly mocking smile as he pointed

to the border they had now both crossed. "If anything, your trespassing." He grinned.

Dawnstar sighed, trying to contain her annoyance as she glared back to him. "Whatever."

Luca stared at her for a moment, as if he was examining her and he wasn't very good at hiding it. Dawnstar was about to snap at him for it, but he spoke before she could.

"You seem very stressed."

"What an understatement." She nearly laughed, feeling somewhat at ease with him. He seemed like a complete airhead, and for once that didn't seem like the worst thing.

"Wanna de-stress?" He chirped as he jumped to his paws and gave her a toothy grin, one she couldn't even force herself to say no to.

"De-stress?" She queried as she tilted her head, though a challenging smile crossed her lips. "How so?"

"Just follow me." Luca replied as he began to head into an unknown direction. Dawnstar was hesitant, however she finally released herself to the temptation as she followed him into land she had never once stepped into.

"Do you live here?" Dawnstar questioned as they walked and Luca just nodded.

"No. I'm a traveler, so I don't really stay in one place for long."

"Wouldn't that get a little tedious after so long?"

"No, not really. It's actually really great." Luca replied, his eyes gleaming in the sunlight as he continued to talk. "I've experienced some things in a single moon than others have got to experience in a lifetime. I've met so many different kinds of cats, learned so many different things and I've seen some of the most beautiful places. You know, I never thought beauty like that even existed until I saw it with my own eyes."

Dawnstar listened intently as she felt a wave of emotions hit her. She remembered what Doveflutter said to her around the time they became warriors.

"Do you ever wonder, even for just a second, what all could be out there? All the different cultures that exist? All the beautiful places to visit?"

Dawnstar smiled at the thought, though she instantly pushed it away from her mind. She was doing good with balancing her grief, but every time she had a moment to even reminisce of her dead mate, she could feel herself falter on the brink of another breakdown that she had kept at bay within herself for so long.

"It does sound like an amazing life." She nearly whispered, and Luca stared at her with confused green eyes.

"You could tag along. I could take you to the beach, it's really pretty. And we always get free food from the locals. Even the humans there feed us!"

"Locals? Humans?" Dawnstar questioned.

"Yeah, the locals are the cats who live there. And you don't know what humans are?" He queried, but she just nodded her head.

"They're the animals that walk on two legs and make those really funny noises." He explained.

"You mean twolegs?" She asked, and Luca just laughed at her, though he tried to contain his laughter as she gave him an annoyed glance.

"Sorry, it's really not that funny." He spoke, though he continued to laugh anyways.

"You're annoying." She muttered.

"But hey, it's working, isn't it?" He beamed as he matched her step, and she just gave him a confused look.

"You're de-stressing!" He chirped. The leader was quiet for a

moment, but she couldn't help but acknowledge that he was actually calming her down.

"Maybe a little."

"More like a little lot! You're so totally chill now."

"Whatever. Don't flatter yourself." Dawnstar spoke as she pushed him away, though she couldn't contain the small smile crossing her own face.

"You didn't answer my question." Luca spoke after a small silence filled the air between them. "About me taking you to the beach."

Dawnstar looked at him with a nearly apologetic smile. So much of her wanted to give in, to completely abandon her life and the struggles that came with it. She could start over. She could completely reinvent herself.

"I wish I could." She spoke quietly as the two settled by a large rock which jutted out over the long expanse of toppling mountains. The sky was painted a multitude of beautiful pinks and oranges, swirled together on a cyan base.

"Why can't you?"

"Because I have a life Luca. I have responsibilities, a lot of them, actually. I have cats who I love back at home. I can't just leave them all."

"It's not that long of a trip to the beach. I could get you there and home in a week tops." He responded as he looked into her eyes.

"It's not just that. I'm kinda their leader, they depend on me."

Luca was quiet for a moment and she didn't miss the flicker of disappointment within his gaze, though he instantly sheltered it with his charismatic grin. "Cat royalty, hm? I'm sorry, your majesty." He joked as he playfully bowed down to her. Dawnstar laughed gently as she nudged him with her paw.

"Okay fine, but I'll be back, and I'll make sure to bring you a present

when I do."

"I'll be waiting." She mused in return.

The two sat up and began to say their farewells, however a sudden idea popped up in her mind, one that she was trying to keep away from him. She didn't want to involve Luca with her clan politics but she really couldn't help herself.

"Hey Luca?"

"Yeah?" He answered, his voice growing a lot more softer than before.

"How are you getting to the beach? What direction are you taking?"

"Oh, I was going to cut through your territory. I hope you don't mind, I'm not gonna take anything-"

"No, you're fine. Then what way are you going?"

"I was planning on taking the valley on the east border. Why?"

Perfect.

"Listen, I just wanted to warn you that another clan lives there."

"Clan?"

"Yeah. There's four of us." Dawnstar explained, though she spoke again before he could reply. "Listen, I hate to ask this of you but I was wondering if you could do me a favor."

"Just ask. I try to be helpful when I can." He grinned.

"Well, it's a long story but my clan is kinda at war with the clan in the valley but they haven't done anything in like, a moon and I have no idea if they're planning an attack or if they were bluffing the whole time and I was just wondering if you could possibly maybe potentially... Spy?" The she-cat rambled, her paws fidgeting as she asked the question.

Luca seemed a little unsure, however he finally nodded. "I'll see if I can find something out for you."

"Thank you so much." She spoke, her eyes gleaming with appreciation as he offered her a small smile and started to walk away.

"Hey Luca," she called out, waiting to speak again until he looked behind his shoulder one last time, "I'll be waiting for my present."

chapter 25

Giving you what you're begging for
Giving you what you say I need
I don't want any settled scores
I just want you to set me free

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"I'm scared. I'm scared *all the time."* Her voice was quiet; delicate. Leopardlune's dim copper eyes stared down at the two sleeping kittens beside her stomach, gaze a mixture of fear and love.

"I wish I could comfort you." Dawnstar whispered from where she lay beside her friend, her head placed gently on her paws.

"You just being here is comforting." Leopardlune soothed, looking at the white molly beside her momentarily before back to the sleeping kits. "I wasn't scared before, because it was just me. But now it's not, and I have these two precious lives that mean everything to me. I had *no idea* love this strong even existed."

"I'm happy for you." Dawnstar murmured as she offered the golden bengal a weak smile, however her friend just looked at her sadly.

"You deserved this, too."

"Maybe." Dawnstar replied softly as she sighed. "But I'll be okay, and so will you."

The leader spent a few more moments with her friend until giving her a soft nudge and leaving the nursery to be met by bright starlight, the full moon cascading pale moonlight throughout camp.

The white she-cat's coat was coated in a silvery glow as she padded outside of camp, her paws falling into ground she was so familiar with. Although she'd never admit it, she was scared too. She felt like she had so many threats breathing down her neck and she

could slowly feel everything falling out of her control.

She so desperately craved control.

Dawnstar continue to let her paws guide her, her eyes drifting over every part of her home, a place which had inflicted so much pain and trial over her. Yet through it all, she still felt this intense loyalty for it. She could never leave, no matter how much she wanted to.

She couldn't tell if that made her strong or weak.

Dawnstar had made it to the ledge where she and Doveflutter had always met at, enjoying the view as she looked down into the valley, exhaling softly until her peace was interrupted.

"It's a little late."

Dawnstar instantly recognized the voice as she curled her lips in a snarl, fur bristling as she met hostile blue eyes.

"I like it. It's calm." The FallClan leader muttered gently, her claws flexing.

"I must say I agree." Creamlily replied, her tail swaying slowly behind her as Harvestleaf and Cicadasong appeared from behind her.

"You've got to be kidding me." Dawnstar nearly whispered under her breath as she eyed all three of them, ears pinning.

"Just wanted to remind you who the real enemy is, Dawnstar." Harvestleaf spoke, his voice hoarse as his claws dug into the ground beneath him.

Dawnstar nearly laughed to herself as her gaze settled with Creamlily's once more, blue burning into blue as she tilted her head to speak, not even hiding the condescending tone which tainted her words. "Too weak to take me on alone so you had to bring the two sidekicks. I'm a little embarrassed for you."

"We both know I could take you down easily all on my own." Creamlily hummed, her voice nonchalant.

"Really?" Dawnstar scoffed. "Just like you took me down *so easily* when I was just an apprentice." She mocked, a nearly challenging smirk crossing her face. This was enough to illicit an immediate reaction out of Creamlily as she released a deafening yowl, and Dawnstar quickly darted out of the way as the SpringClan warrior flung herself towards the FallClan leader.

Control.

Dawnstar watched as the three warriors began to circle her, head constantly turning to face a different opponent as she dipped her head, teeth bared and tail lashing.

"This is *real* honorable." She nearly whispered, her words nothing but satire.

Control.

As Harvestleaf swiped his claws against her shoulder, the white she-cat let out a small wince before giving his cheek a quick scratch, instantly relishing in the warm liquid which stained her paw after.

Dawnstar quickly twisted around to dodge a blow from Cicadasong before her teeth made contact with his neck. The white she-cat used all of her energy to shake her head and rip out his flesh, and though successful, she wasn't able to send another attack as Creamlily leaped on top of her, sending Dawnstar's legs to buckle as she fell to the ground, unable to breathe.

Dawnstar struggled for a moment, her mind seeming to be aflame- no, her *whole body* felt as though it was aflame.

She began to let herself feel everything she had been containing; all the pain, the memories, the grief. Death. All of it. Her mother. Father. Mate.

She could feel herself growing enraged.

Control.

But the rage was growing stronger, the pain and the heartache was begging for her to just let go. To release every single emotion she

kept bottled up.

Control.

Dawnstar could feel herself growing lightheaded, her vision going in and out as she was still unable to breathe.

Screw control.

Dawnstar finally let everything she kept bottled up out, releasing her own inner strength which she had kept at bay for so long. The white she-cat pushed all of her pain into strength as she freed herself from Creamlily's grasp, not even letting herself breathe as she sent deadly claws to her ear, digging in as deep as she could before ripping out and backing away, finally letting herself even her breathing.

Creamlily's strained screams were music to her ears and Dawnstar was able to dodge another attack from Harvestleaf, her eyes shining brighter than they ever had before.

Cicadasong was able to rake his claws over her muzzle however her anger and adrenaline had completely numbed her pain, though she could taste the copper tang of blood in her mouth and that was enough to tell her it was a deep cut.

As Creamlily had composed herself, the three of them had her corned, her back completely facing the ledge. Dawnstar looked behind her before looking at the three of them, her eyes closed to slits.

"Take this as a reminder, Dawnstar." Creamlily heaved, a nearly crooked smile crossing her face. "We have something you don't."

"And what's that?" She snickered as she spit out the blood in her mouth.

"*Allies."* She hissed, and before Dawnstar could react, all three were hurling themselves towards her. As they made contact, she desperately tried to defend herself, sending calculated blows to each of them but she was simply outnumbered.

As they neared the edge, Dawnstar went over every solution. She was in no way going to win this.

Unless...

Dawnstar was hesitant for a few moments, taking every beating from the three of them until she released an angered-powered yowl and dug her claws into Cicadasong's back. The two rolled around in a fury of tooth and claw, and it wasn't until she heard Harvestleaf screaming for them to stop that a satisfied grin crossed her face.

Dawnstar soon felt her body leave the ground as she fell from the ledge; just like she had planned. *I have nine lives, he only has one.*

Dawnstar opened her eyes, gaze instantly meeting Cicadasong's horrified stare as the realization of his fate dawned on him.

She felt as though everything in her was slowed and she let herself relax, drowning out Cicadasong's useless pleas for help as she let herself fall.

Then suddenly, everything went black.

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All her pain had subsided. Her anger was numbed. She felt weightless.

Dawnstar's vision finally began to return to her and she found herself in a starry expanse, lit by warm light yet she couldn't see the sun or moon. The ground below her was soft and the smell of pine was strong.

"Welcome, Dawnstar. You've lost your first life."

The pale white she-cat felt herself melt in the newcomer's voice as she turned to face him, her blue eyes meeting blazing copper.

"Sunstar," she greeted, "it's nice to see you."

"I wish it was under better circumstances." He murmured softly as he gave her a sad smile. Sunstar then turned tail and began
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walking, motioning for her to follow.

"You see Dawnstar, there is something very dark which has hosted itself into your world." He spoke, and she just watched him intently. "Something that is filled with unexplainable corruption."

"Please don't be vague. I can't handle the pretty-worded prophecies the medicine cats always talk about. Just tell what it is, Sunstar. *Please."*

"This is no prophecy, Dawnstar." He spoke as he halted by a beautiful pool of glimmering water. "This is a warning."

"A prophecy is a prediction; it entails knowledge of the future. This darkness I speak of is already here in the present, and it's already tainted your clan." Sunstar went on to explain, and she didn't miss the flicker of pain beneath his gaze.

"Sunstar, what *is* this darkness?"

"I really do wish I could tell you, but not even StarClan knows what this dark entity is, or where it came from or what it wants." He went on to explain, and Dawnstar couldn't help but grow annoyed by his uselessness.

"Then why bring me here if you're no help to me?" She hissed, though her eyes were pleading.

"To confirm the suspicions you already had about the murders going on within your clan."

"But they were killed by Tealpool." Dawnstar spoke, though her voice held uncertainty.

"Physically, yes. But you and I both know there is more to it." Sunstar sighed as he dipped his paw into the gelid water. "Tealpool was a good cat."

"Is," Dawnstar paused hesitantly, "is he here?"

Sunstar nodded. "Yes. StarClan will not hold him accountable for actions we do not believe he had full involuntary control over."

Dawnstar nodded solemnly before she looked at Sunstar, unsure to ask her next question but she did anyways.

"Is Doveflutter here?"

"Yes." Sunstar replied, offering her a small smile. "Though this was a conversation only you and me could have."

"Can I see her?"

"I'm sorry, but it's about time I sent you back home." He replied quietly, and Dawnstar just nodded reluctantly. The two held a small stare until he motioned her to the pool, explaining to her the procedure which would send her back to the living.

"Dawnstar." Sunstar said one last time as she was about to dip her nose in. The white she-cat slowly faced him, head tilting in a silent question.

"Just wanted to let you know," he paused as he gave her a weak smile, "*it's okay* to ask for help."

chapter 26

All my indecision, all of my excess
Don't you ever tell me I'm not loving you best
And I just need a minute, I just need a breath
It's very hard to drink to my continued success

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"It's so pretty." She gasped, eyes fluttering up to meet excited green eyes before looking back down to the glimmering shell at her paws.

"I thought you'd say that." Luca purred, a single ear flickering.

"I was completely kidding." Dawnstar then deadpanned, rolling her eyes dramatically. "It's really ugly."

"And you suck at lying." Luca shrugged, however the two just ended up chuckling softly. Dawnstar relished in the moment for awhile, however she didn't miss the questioning look which crossed his sage gaze as he continuously looked at the scar on her muzzle.

"Staring is rude." She murmured, and he looked away, ears pinned in embarrassment however she weakly laughed it off. "I got into a fight with that enemy clan I was telling you about, however I'd hardly call it that. It was completely unfair."

Luca looked back to her as they began walking, whiskers twitching curiously. "How many were there?"

"Three against one. They aren't much for dignity." She muttered, tail lashing behind her. Luca just stared at her, his gaze sympathetic until he began speaking.

"I met one."

"What?" Dawnstar replied, head tilting. "What do you mean?"

"Yeah." He shrugged. "Her name was weird— Heaven something—

she was a calico."

"Havenglow." Dawnstar corrected. "How did that go?"

"I was passing through SpringClan territory and I found their camp. I was gonna snoop around like you asked, but she caught me." He explained, his eyes fixated on the trail they were both following. "I just played dumb, said I was just passing through. She bought it."

"That's good." Dawnstar nearly whispered. "Lucky it was her, she's one of the more passive warriors in that clan."

"Yeah, she was nice enough I suppose." He lulled quietly. Dawnstar just looked at him briefly as they continued to walk on the rill's bank, her head tilting. He was interesting to her, everything about him. The she-cat found herself wanting to know more about him, though as she thought about it harder, it all pointed back to her. Luca was someone she befriended and liked, though she kept viewing him as an asset- someone to help and benefit her. She tried to keep it down, to control it, but he was so willing to help before and that kind of easy sway was something hard for her to resist.

"Luca, why were you so willing to help me? You barely knew me, yet you still went to hostile land. You didn't even ask for anything in return." She queried, the words gentle on her tongue. Luca was quiet as he shrugged.

"I grew up with five sisters. Five annoying, loud sisters." He began, ear flicking. "All my life, I was always forced to do what they wanted. My mom would never let me venture out on my own- think it had to do with my older brother's death. She was always so cautious after that." Luca explained, sighing quietly until he continued. "I just was so sheltered for most of my childhood, that when I was finally old enough to make my own decisions and experience things I never got to experience, I knew I wanted so much more in life."

Dawnstar listened intently, nodding every once in awhile to show she was listening as he continued.

"Honestly did some really stupid stuff when I was young, but what

can you expect? Sheltered my whole life then I get a whole new taste on the world, I'm bound to be a little crazy." He chuckled. "My sisters called me risk-prone, and they were right. Anything to get my adrenaline rushing was a must. So when you asked me to spy on an enemy clan, I didn't have a single doubt. I just like the danger behind it. Life's boring without thrills."

"Very philosophical." Dawnstar mocked playfully, and he just swatted her with his tail.

"You asked." He retorted back, fluttering his eyes to her as he nudged her into the underbrush. "What about you? You always have strangers do your dirty work?"

Dawnstar froze at the question, over analyzing it more than she should. He probably meant no harm by it, however she couldn't contain the small panic the query elicited inside of her.

"No." She replied flatly, though she eased up as she realized the unfriendly tone. "You were heading in that direction already. It was *convenient."*

"*Suuuree*." Luca teased. "Well anyways, glad I could help."

"I'd hardly call it help, not like you heard anything useful." She mused, however a challenging smirk crossed her face "Though if you're so obsessed with danger and thrills and what not, you could go back for me." She suggested, trying to sound playful though she was silently hoping he'd agree.

"Are you trying to get me to spy again? Very desperate, I see." He teased as he gave her a sly grin.

"We'd be helping each other." She shrugged. "You'd be my fourth eyes, and I give you a life-endangering mission!"

"I said I like adrenaline, not death."

"You also said you like danger." She added.

Luca looked at her for a moment before sighing. "Fine. You know you're being a *really* bad friend." He spoke, giving her a fake frown.

"We're friends now?" She replied, smirking slightly as her tail fluttered behind her.

"Don't push it." He spoke, restraining any kind of emotion, though a small smile finally crossed his face. However his face completely changed into one of disgust, and so did her's when a putrid aroma filtered both their noses.

"What's that smell?" She grimaced.

"I don't know." He replied, sticking his tongue out in disgust. "Smells rotten."

As they followed the scent, she could nearly feel her food leave her stomach as they eventually found it. Dawnstar looked down to see a dead swan with multiple maggot-invested puncture wounds.

"*Gross."* Luca hissed.

"Tell me about it." She replied, trying to hold her breath as the two got as far away from the decaying swan.

As they did, Dawnstar finally let herself breathe, relishing in the fresh air.

"It's a little funny to me. Swans are really pretty, you'd never think you could see something so pretty," he paused, "*so ugly."*

"Right? Poor thing." She sighed.

"Nah, those things are *ruthless."* He replied. "When I was a kit, one stole *my* mossball then chased me around when I tried to get it back!" He vented, however Dawnstar just laughed.

"Don't laugh. It was very traumatizing. I'm scarred for life now." He retorted, placing a paw to his chest dramatically.

"I just couldn't imagine the kind of trauma you went through." Dawnstar added on, her voice completely sarcastic.

"Thank you for your sympathy. It was a really dark time in my life." Luca murmured, ears pinned, though after a few fleeting moments

he gave her a wide grin.

"You're horrible." Dawnstar scolded, laughing gently as she sat by the rill's edge, the beige tomcat shortly joining her.

It was a nice escape. She was good at distracting herself; sheltering herself from the pain of grief, or the weight of responsibility.

Being around someone who knew nothing of her was something she didn't know she needed. To Luca, she was a normal cat living a normal life. She felt like she was letting so many of her clanmates down, falling in between a line of control and composure and it was a reliever to finally not have to meet so many impossible expectations.

Every time she let herself give up control, she instantly regretted it and found herself growing more desperate for it.

Eventually she was going to have to face her emotions and face her clanmates. Their declining trust in her was stressing, and she knew that the only way she could get them to listen to her was through fear.

It worked before, and at this point, it was the only way she knew on how to keep balance. She wasn't sure how far she was going to have to take it, but Dawnstar knew one thing for sure; she was going to bring her clan to victory, and she was going to do anything to achieve it.

Even if that meant destruction followed in its path, she wasn't going to allow her clan to fail once more.

Control, Dawnstar. You are in control.

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"We are sitting ducks. Dawnstar, are you ever going to retaliate? You lost a life because of an unfair scuffle and you've done nothing." Frostbird snickered, eyes far from understanding.

"I've already told you, Creamlily mentioned something about allies and I'm not putting us in a battle we know nothing about."
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Dawnstar countered back.

"Who do we think these allies are? Maybe they were bluffing." Blossomfall suggested, though even her voice was uncertain.

"Maybe another clan?" Lionglare queried, his tail curling around his paws. "It's the only idea that makes sense to me. Why would anyone else join a war that doesn't involve them?"

"This war doesn't involve the other clans, either. Why would they team up with SpringClan? It has nothing to do with them." Dawnstar reasoned.

"Makes more sense than rogues and loners being these so-called allies. Maybe Ivystar made a deal with Viperstar or Fallowstar?" Goldenfell spoke up.

"Maybe." Dawnstar responded.

"So now what? We just wait until they attack us? *Again?* They keep winning, over and over. I want to fight back. I want to give Ivystar a taste of her own medicine." Blossomfall slightly vented, Frostbird nodding in agreement beside her.

"What choice do we have? Raiding them now would be stupid. We have no idea what we'd be walking into." Lionglare replied, his ear flicking as he held her gaze.

"Lionglare's right. We'll wait until we know more." Dawnstar concluded.

"How are we possibly going to *know more?"* Frostbird challenged, her eyes callous.

"I have it under control." Dawnstar quickly fired back. Frostbird held her gaze for an uncomfortable amount of time until the leader dismissed the meeting and left her den, trying to drown out her frustration until her gaze landed on Leopardlune and Brinebloom with their kits.

"Is it their first time out?" She smiled as she walked towards them.

"Yeah, well, no. Cranekit snuck out the other day." Leopardlune chuckled lightly, tail dusting over the ground.

"Really? Reminds me of us as kits." Dawnstar murmured gently as she settled beside her friend.

"Remember when Doveflutter made us all sneak out? She was crazy back then." Brinebloom chuckled. Dawnstar went back to the memory, though she blocked out her mate's daunting remarks.

"Yeah, she was. But we used to have so much fun together, all of us." Leopardlune grinned as she placed her head on her paws. "Now two of us are dead."

"Yeah. I don't even remember the last time I talked to Lionglare, Nightglow or Bloss." Brinebloom responded, a single ear flickering.

"I feel bad for Blossomfall." Leopardlune started as she watched her two kits play, eyes nearly dazing off. "We all have our siblings still. Both of her's are dead- one was even killed by the other."

Dawnstar looked at her briefly before she directed her gaze to the playing kits, collecting herself from all the memories as she sighed softly.

"How did our lives get so twisted?"

chapter 27

"I need you to think. Can you tell how many cats you think you saw? Names you think you heard? Anything, Luca."

"I," Luca paused, his face growing concentrated as he tried to think, "I saw a lot of cats, I know that. I also heard the name Ivory, like, a lot."

Dawnstar was quiet for a moment, her own mind replaying the name over and over. *Ivory? That doesn't sound familiar at all.*

"Ivory? I don't think they have someone named that." Dawnstar murmured until her eyes brightened as she looked at him. "Could it have been Ivy?"

"Yeah, it could've been." Luca shrugged until his face instantly lit up, "Oh! Silentfeather was a name I heard! I only remembered it because it was pretty. You clan cats have funny names." He rambled a bit, chuckling lightly however he paused abruptly as a horrified look crossed her face.

"No." She breathed out as she began pacing, eyes glued to her paws. "I was hoping it wasn't true."

"Hoping what wasn't true?"

"Those cruel fox-hearts." She hissed as she continued pacing. "They allied with SummerClan."

"How do you know?" Luca queried, the confusion on his face still clearly evident as the FallClan leader met his gaze.

"Because Silentfeather is their medicine cat." She hissed, the words feeling like venom on her tongue.

"Yeah, that doesn't sound too good." Luca muttered, trying to break the tension with an awkward laugh however it didn't work.

"Fallowstar is a fool, involving himself in a war that doesn't concern him." She continued to ramble, falling back into a pace as Luca just stared at her blankly. "I hate Ivystar, but StarClan she's smart. How did she even manage that?"

"Are you oka-"

"I mean, there is no way we can beat them together. SpringClan alone has beat us several times. This is so bad, I mean *really bad."* She continued to rant, not even hearing Luca until she faced him once more.

"I grew up thinking life would be easy because it was what I was told. I really thought I was invincible." She laughed, though it was more out of frustration.

"What do you mean?" Luca queried again, his head tilting.

"You see Luca, when I was made into an apprentice, my dad didn't think I was good enough to be a warrior. He set all of his attention on my brother. But I was still apart of his image. His reputation. So he made sure I was something else, something better." She explained, faltering some words as they fell from her mouth like rapid fire. "He was the deputy at the time, so he was close with our leader. He convinced Sunstar to let me train as a medicine cat apprentice. I sucked at it, like, really sucked."

"You were a medicine cat apprentice?" Luca queried, his confusion getting replaced with curiosity.

"Yeah but it's unimportant. Anyways, I got abducted by our enemy clan blah blah and I ended up fighting my way home and this caught his attention. When I got home, I switched ranks because I was so good. I mean, I'm not trying to brag or whatever, and I'm not trying to be arrogant." She shrugged as she fidgeted with a leaf. "It's just the truth. I was good, better than all the other apprentices and I hadn't trained a single day in my life as a warrior. They even called me a prodigy, you know?"

Luca stared at her blankly as he tried to process everything she told him, however she spoke again before he could.

"So I was good, and I thought I would live life on easy mode. Long story short, I was wrong," she paused as she looked at the now destroyed leaf, "I was so incredibly wrong."

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Her mind was constantly on overdrive and never even spared her a moment's break. She was constantly thinking, agonizing on what if's and worst case scenarios.

Dawnstar settled down in her nest, trying to imagine the warmth which used to greet her.

But she was met by a lifeless chill; a constant reminder that her mate was dead and she was never coming back. Dawnstar could feel her claws digging into her nest as she closed her eyes, nearly begging StarClan to grant her sleep.

Finally they did.

Dawnstar's eyes opened to a beautiful beach, subsiding waves lapping at her paws as morning sunrise sent a beautiful golden glimmer to tint the crashing waves. The sky was a stunning blue with faded streaks of pink and a hint of a gentle orange.

"It's so breathtaking."

Dawnstar felt every part of her break at the voice as she twisted around to meet eyes which used to bring her so much comfort and assurance. A shade of alluring sage that promised her security.

"Are you real?" Dawnstar whispered, her voice barely audible.

"My love for you was real. Can that be enough?" Doveflutter spoke, her voice just as soft as she could remember. Dawnstar just gave her a weak smile and nod as the calico stood beside her and looked out into the endless expanse of ocean.

"I always liked to imagine us on the beach, playing in the waves with our adopted kits. I had this whole perfect life for us planned, you know?" She spoke, her words delicate as she sighed gently and leaned her head on Dawnstar's shoulder.
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"You deserved so much better." Dawnstar whispered, her eyes already getting teary as Doveflutter looked at her once more, a faint frown crossing her face.

"We deserved so much better." She corrected, her green eyes gleaming like emeralds in the cascading sunlight until she looked back into the ocean. "One day I was going to take you here. It's beautiful, isn't it?"

"Beautiful is an understatement." Dawnstar murmured, though she wasn't talking about the beach.

It was her one moment of clarity, however Dawnstar felt everything in her stall as the sky dulled, the sunlight shifting into starlight. The white she-cat looked to her side, and to her horror, Doveflutter was gone.

Dawnstar ran on the beach line, her paws crashing in the waves as she looked around frantically, blue eyes shining brilliantly in the moonlight until she felt her paws land on something different; solid.

Looking down, the leader backed up in fear as her paws were drenched in fresh blood, the acrid tang stinging her nose and causing her eyes to water from the ferocity.

Though the she-cat jumped as she bumped into something— someone— quickly flipping around to meet bloodshot green eyes.

"Oh my StarClan," she muttered, her own eyes widening in shock, "*Flowerbee."*

The former deputy just stared at her, mouth agape until blood started dripping from her ears, eyes and mouth. Dawnstar backed up hesitantly until she began running, her head racing over and over.

Wake up. You need to wake up.

Suddenly flashbacks began reciting in her life; Sunstar's death, her first battle, her and Doveflutter's escape from SpringClan, Leopardlune revealing Brinebloom's scratch from her father, Bluegaze's confrontation, Bluegaze's death.

They just kept coming and coming, blinding her from her path, taunting her without a single break.

The montage of memories continued on with Flowerbee's death, Swanflutter's death, Doveflutter's death, Hawkhowl's death and ended with Tealpool's confession.

Wake up. It's not real. Wake up, Dawnstar.

Dawnstar's vision went black and suddenly she was falling, an intense rush of fear and panic overcoming her as she screamed, her voice instantly echoing back into her ears as she fell blindly.

It was a fear she had never experienced, the first time she had ever felt an immense feeling of loneliness.

Dawnstar felt herself grow weightless, eyes snapping open as red eyes glared back at her and two doves began fluttering around her head. She watched intently, gasping as a hawk came out of nowhere and snatched them between it's talons.

She then looked down, jaw opening as bees fluttered around a small, frail dahlia. All time seemed to stop until the bees suddenly dropped dead, their little wings twitching until both the bees and flower completely faded.

Dawnstar was surrounded by darkness once more, a painful freeze sending chills throughout her entire body. *Wake up. You need to wake up.*

The pale molly was then at Fishcape, the sun high in the sky as it sent down uncomfortably hot waves of heat. The FallClan leader hesitantly padded towards the clear water, looking at her shattered reflection in the creek. She couldn't even recognize herself.

As she stared for a few more fleeting moments, the she-cat was distracted as gentle movement hummed in her ears. In the water was a swan; it truly was one of the most beautiful creatures, covered in perfectly soft white feathers.

"White has always been symbolized as pure, Dawnkit, and dawn symbolizes hope. You are our family's hope and purity."

Her mother's words were whispered in her ears, sometimes quietly, sometimes loudly. However the words kept getting louder and more threatening and suddenly the swan was lying at her paws. If she didn't know any better, she would've assumed it was sleeping.

However that wasn't the case.

Dawnstar watched as little x's were carved into the bird's skin, little pools of blood leaking from each new ingrained cut as her mother's words continued to scream in her ears, and suddenly, she could feel a piercing pain stabbing her chest and Dawnstar looked down to see the same x marking being embedded in her own skin.

Suddenly, Dawnstar felt the pain instantly fade as she jolted awake, instantly looking to her side as she sat back in relief.

"Doveflutter, I just had the worst nightmare." She muttered, her breathing evening out. As her mate didn't respond, Dawnstar opened her eyes just for her heart to instantly shatter.

Doveflutter wasn't there.

chapter 28

Rate yourself and rake yourself
Take all the courage you have left
And waste it on fixing all the problems
That you made in your own head

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Fear is natural. It's a primitive emotion, one which taints all souls. It's powerful; Dawnstar found it competitive.

Competing with fear; it's all in your head.

Maybe if she told herself that enough, she'd grow to actually believe it. She could craft this reality of it perfectly in her mind, maybe she could make it expand to farther lengths.

She hated fear. Everyone hates fear.

Every day was the same. Life was so draining but so compelling. She wasn't sure if she was happy; sometimes she felt as though happiness was a myth. *No one is truly happy, right?*

She continued meeting with Luca. It was daily occurrence, she would almost call it *fun.* Maybe happiness was real.

Luca seemed happy.

Though times were growing hazardous. Luca was completely willing to spy for her until it was getting dangerous. She could tell that even he was growing wary, but she couldn't stop herself from asking for more. She wanted to. She wanted the control to spare his life from clan politics that didn't even involve him.

He was a good cat. He was selfless.

She was taking advantage of it.

"Dawnstar? You're dozing off again." Lionglare quietly spoke, his eyes soft. The pale molly looked at him and shook her head.

"Sorry."

Lionglare just nodded as he continued helping with the barrier being built around camp. She watched for a few moments, her mind blank. It was rare that she was thoughtless; her mind hollow. Sometimes she didn't feel real.

"I was just curious, how do you know Fallowstar is working with SpringClan?" The tomcat went on to query. Dawnstar just looked at him and she almost asked him to repeat the question until it finally clicked in her head.

She panicked a little and it was enough to push her out of the dissociating trance she had fallen into. Lionglare was confused by her demeanor.

"Remember when you tripped in that huge hole? We couldn't even get you out because Nightglow was laughing so hard." Dawnstar spoke, instantly trying to change the subject.

It worked.

"I remember!" Nightglow chirped in, his eyes gleaming as he joined them, sticks between his jaws. "That was probably the funniest thing I've ever seen."

"I'm thrilled that my discomfort was so humorous to you." Lionglare grumbled.

Dawnstar remembered that she laughed too. She laughed so hard that her stomach hurt. She missed that feeling.

Dawnstar turned around as elated giggling hummed in her ears, blue gaze settling on Cranekit and Stonekit running around their parents' paws, their eyes bright.

"I don't think I ever want to be a parent." Nightglow murmured softly, looking to meet the pair of eyes looking at him. "Don't think I'm responsible enough. Sometimes I still feel like a kit myself."

"You definitely act like it." Lionglare deadpanned.

"Someone has to be the fun one." Nightglow grinned as he continued working on the barrier, however he continued speaking before anyone else could.

"But yeah, don't want to be a parent; not now at least. Blossomfall feels the same way. She's," he paused, "she's distant. Not the mother type, and I respect it."

"*Blossomfall*?" Lionglare lulled.

"Don't act surprised." Nightglow sighed. "We aren't official or anything. I care about her though," he paused, "*love is weird."*

"Tell me about it." Dawnstar spoke; nearly whispered.

The three continued to work in silence until Dawnstar felt herself grow lightheaded, her vision going in and out. Lionglare noticed first, quickly rushing to her side.

"I'm fine." She reassured, nodding her head. Lionglare was unsure, but finally nodded his head too.

It wasn't until she was throwing up that both the tomcats were by her side, and before she was given the chance to retort, they were escorting her to Graypetal's den.

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"I don't know if I can keep spying. I want to help you, I really do. But," Luca paused, "but I need to value my life too. I've had so many close calls and it's just getting a little nerving; even for me."

"Mhm."

"I feel selfish for saying it. My mom always taught me to put other's needs before my own. It's just different from what I'm used too; I like adrenaline, not being some war criminal."

"Mhm."
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"But if you need me to keep doing it, I can. I'll be okay. You'll be okay too." Luca continued speaking as he offered her a strained, weak smile.

"Mhm."

Luca just stared at her, but Dawnstar didn't return his gaze. He was confused and she felt like she was walking on air.

"Dawnstar? Are you okay? Did something happen? Did someone hurt you?" He started rambling, his eyes growing concerned.

"Mhm."

"What? Who?" He spoke, head shaking frantically. "Who hurt you?"

"I'm pregnant."

The changed look on Luca's face was like rapid fire. His concern quickly bled into shock. Dawnstar let her claws dig into the sand, the cool soil seeping into her white fur.

"Are they," he paused hesitantly, "are they-"

"Yes."

Dawnstar finally met his gaze. She wasn't sure what she was expecting, or what she was hoping to expect, but it became clear enough when the troubled look on his face grew into a look of joy.

"Dawn," he was breathless, "this is unexpected, but not unwelcome; not unwelcome at all."

"Debatable."

Luca looked around as if trying to contain the information given to him until he was finally back within her gaze, elated sage burning into dim azure.

"I'm going to be dad." He whispered, a smile slowly crossing his face, one of pure compassion. Dawnstar could feel her teeth grinding and her heart beating rapidly against her chest.

Her mind was disoriented. Solutions to this *problem* were not coming to her, because that's what this was; *a problem.*

"I can join the clan! I'm a good hunter, I'll help as much as I can. I can catch birds like no other, I'll be useful!" He began ranting as he walked in circles, ears perked and eyes full of life. "I'm not the best fighter but I'm willing to learn; I mean, I want to protect my kits. I obviously need to know how to fight. It can't be that hard."

"I don't want to be a mother."

"I'll teach them how to catch birds and I'll make sure to take them on annual trips to the beach; all of us, together. As a family."

"You can't join the clan."

"This is going to great; I never thought I'd settle down. It scared me, but Dawnstar, I'm *anything* but scared now."

Dawnstar just stared at him, her face hopeless.

"I have to go. I'll see you later." She muttered before turning tail and leaving abruptly, swiftly breaking into a run so she didn't have to stall. Though she wasn't running for long until she felt herself collide with someone else, alarm churning inside of her until she meet familiar viridescent eyes.

"Going somewhere?" Risingflame chuckled as she shook out her fur. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

"What are you doing so close to the border?" Dawnstar murmured, ears pinned uncomfortably low. Risingflame just scrunched her face.

"I could ask you the same thing."

The two just stared at each other for a few moments until Risingflame began talking again, and luckily the pale she-cat changed the subject.

"Did you hear that I caught a hawk all by myself? I mean, everyone has been talking about it." Her former apprentice spoke as they

headed back to camp together.

"You don't say."

"I do say, that's why I said it." Risingflame said matter-of-factly. "Fernflicker thinks she's the best hunter, but I don't. No one does. They all know it's me."

Dawnstar scoffed.

"I mean," Risingflame laughed dryly, "you were my mentor. I was obviously going to be the best."

"I think that's the nicest thing you've ever said to me."

"Don't get used to it."

"Wasn't planning on it." Dawnstar responded, a single ear flickering as Risingflame spoke the whole way home. She didn't mind though, it made the time pass faster and she just wanted to sit in her den and *think*.

As they returned home, Dawnstar felt swarmed by her clanmates, though she instantly dismissed everyone who approached her and left them in a wake of confusion as she sulked into her den.

Her mind wasn't blank anymore, though she wished it was. She wished it was blank to shelter her from the horrible thoughts crossing her mind. Thoughts of things she didn't even know she was capable of.

She didn't want to, but what other choice did she have?

Doveflutter was right.

Everyone was losing faith in her, if there was any to even begin with. The only way things ever worked in her favor where through fear control.

She hated fear.

Dawnstar sank into her den and closed her eyes. She felt completely

paralyzed and if she didn't know any better, she'd swear she was floating.

Her eyes opened.

She could feel herself gravitating towards the exit of her den, her mind screaming at her as her gaze settled on Nightglow and Blossomfall sharing tongues.

No. You can find another way Dawnstar.

It was wrong. She knew it was wrong.

She couldn't stop.

As Blossomfall headed into the warriors' den, Dawnstar forced herself to muster up the confidence to approach him.

"We need to talk." She spoke, her voice borderline demanding. "*Please."*

Nightglow tilted his head curiously but eventually nodded and followed her out of camp. She silenced his questions and kept uncomfortably quiet.

As they made it to a secluded area, she eventually faced him, blue eyes burning into his copper stare. There were multiple ways she could go about this, so she decided to gravitate towards the more reasonable one.

"We were all friends once. We grew up together. We went our separate ways. Maybe we're not all the close anymore, but that friendship still means something to me."

Nightglow tilted his head, eyes cautiously questioning. "It means something to me, too." He spoke, every word just as careful and confused as the next.

"I'm telling you this because you've always been the accepting one. The understanding one. I'm telling you this and no one else because really," she paused, nearly breathless, "because I have no one else to tell, and I'm going to ask you something. Not as your leader. Not as

your clanmate. But as your *friend,* I'm going to ask something of you."

Nightglow was silent for a moment, his curiosity growing into something more concerned. "What's going on?" He queried finally, trying to sound calm.

"Everyone is talking about me. I hear them, they think I don't, but I do." She spoke, her eyes meeting everything but his gaze. "I've been absent a lot, and it's not because I've been marking borders by myself or because I go for walks. It's because I've been meeting someone."

"What?" Nightglow questioned, though she relaxed as his voice didn't sound the least bit judgmental.

"Yeah. His name is Luca, but he's helped so much. He's the reason I know about Fallowstar working with SpringClan; he spies." She spoke, feeling herself slowly calm down. *Maybe she could pull this off.* "He's put himself in danger for us so many times and no one even knows, but that's not my problem."

"Dawnstar," Nightglow paused slowly, "what is your problem?"

She went quiet, claws unsheathing and sheathing in the ground beneath her. A chilling zephyr filled the space between them, loud enough to put her drumming heart to a short silence.

"I'm pregnant. I'm pregnant with Luca's kits and no one but you can ever know."

Nightglow grew quiet again and the silence was nearly unbearable. Dawnstar just wanted him to say something. Anything.

"Hey," he whispered, "it's going to be okay. Just tell the clan, maybe they'll understand. Besides, if he's been spying for us, maybe they'll welcome hi-"

"No!" Dawnstar yelled, ears pinning instantly after. "No. He can't join. Our clan is entirely pure and they won't accept different blood. We both know this."

"Then what are you going to do?" Nightglow queried.

"Nightglow," she paused, her voice growing delicate, "I need you to say they're your kits. I need you to do this for me."

"What?" His reply was instant and she felt the panic within her continue to grow. "Listen Dawnstar, I can't do that. I'm sorry but I can't."

Wrong answer.

"Why?" Dawnstar nearly exclaimed. "They'd believe it, we've been friends for so long. Say yes. Please say yes."

"No Dawnstar!" Nightglow snapped this time, his voice losing any remaining sympathy. "I love Blossomfall and she loves me. I can't do that to her."

"I'm not saying we have to be together, Nightglow. We'll just tell the clan it was a mistake. She'll understand!"

"You and I both know she won't just *understand."* Nightglow hissed, eyes falling into slits. "I cannot just pretend to be the father and I won't fake love for kits I do not give a single care for!"

She was mad now; a rage elicited strictly from fear. *Yes you will,* she thought, her own eyes falling into callous slits.

"Yes you will. Even if you don't agree to it, I'll tell them anyways, and I'll make sure to tell Blossomfall first." She snarled, her voice just as malicious as her deadly stare.

"She won't believe you. None of them will." Nightglow snarled in return, claws flexing in the soil as his tail lashed rapidly.

"*Oh please*." Dawnstar snickered as she began to circle him. "The clan already treats you like a joke and you don't have the maturity to handle it." The words just kept falling. She felt as though she was being consumed in a trance, one driven by her paranoia. A little voice in her head kept telling her to stop, to apologize and tell him to forget it ever happened, but a larger, much more prominent voice kept her going.

"I've lied before, you know? And the clan bought it." She was whispering now, though her voice was just as deadly as before. "Not a single one questioned me. I lied and I was good at it."

"You wouldn't." Nightglow whispered in return, his eyes rounding as he just stared at her with disgust.

"Oh I would, and I will. So it's up to you," Dawnstar paused as she grew neck-and-neck with him, their breath entangling,

"you tell them, or I will."

chapter 29

Shadows settle on the place that you left
Our minds are troubled by the emptiness
Destroy the middle, it's a waste of time
From the perfect start to the finish line

"I'm thinking Luca. My mind, it's like an image, clear as day." The words felt brittle on her tongue, painful almost, a desperate need to be heard lining them so delicately. "It's my safe haven, it's where I keep my life in order. It's how I conceal my emotions. It's how I'm able to process things, how I'm able to analyze things."

Luca looked at her, his eyes nothing but sympathy. *I don't need sympathy,* she thought with unfair frustration, *I need you to give me advice.* But that wasn't who Luca was; he listened, he gave a shoulder to cry on when needed, but he never intervened.

"The image is fading and I can't see as clearly anymore. You know I'm not a bad person, right? Morality is such a delicate idea and I'm tired of the constant ethical battle which never spares me any kind of break." Dawnstar continued on, not paying him any mind as her claw twirled around a wilting flower, her eyes concentrated on nothing but the petals which fluttered from the bud.

"My mother always told me that being at the top would never guarantee you happiness and that love defied everything. She was wrong. I've lost more loved ones then I care to count and that pain is something I want to live without." She grimaced, claw completely mauling the flower as thoughts of Doveflutter crossed her mind. "At the end of the day, the only person who you can truly rely on is yourself. I don't think that makes me a bad person."

Luca was quiet. For so long he was quiet and she was growing irked. She needed his annoyingly obsessive optimism.

He was just quiet.

Until he wasn't.

"The kits," he paused shortly, "they're due soon."

Dawnstar felt every inch of her turn into a mess of anger, blue eyes finally meeting void green. Her teeth were bared and it took everything in her not to yell.

He was right.

It had been nearly two moons since the announcement of her pregnancy, and potentially the worst two moons of her life.

"I'm confiding in you about my problems and that's all you have to say?" She hissed, her eyes flickering back and fourth between his.

"Is that all I am to you?" Luca finally hissed back, something he *never* did before. "Someone to *confide* in?"

Dawnstar's anger instantly melted into guilt, and she shook her head weakly as she sat down and let her fur flatten back out.

"No."

"Really? Because it sure seems like it." He spit back, though his eyes were more hurt than angry. "It's always about you, all the time. Have you ever thought to ask me how my day was? How I'm doing? I've been training my tail off to join your clan and you still haven't said anything to them!"

Dawnstar felt herself stiffen at his words, her teeth softly jittering. *No I haven't, and I'm not going to.*

"I appreciate everything you've done for me Luca." She finally sighed, ears pinned. "I'm sorry."

Luca just looked away and she had never seen him so down before. It hurt and she wanted to comfort him. She wanted to bring him home.

But she couldn't.

"It's okay." He spoke back, nearly whispered. He finally looked back to her and gave her a strained smile, though it did nothing but make her feel even more guilty.

She was in a mess and she had no idea how to get herself out of it.

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The walk home was mind torture.

Physical torture too, and she quickly learned that the nausea and the constant dizziness often left her lowly energized. She didn't know carrying a whole bunch of little lives would be so uncomfortable, even though it probably should've been common sense.

However it was returning home that always sent strikes of anxiety up and down her chest.

Ever since she announced her pregnancy, everything changed. Her friends completely shunned her and Nightglow both; all but Leopardlune.

It had been common knowledge that Blossomfall was in love with him and now Dawnstar was known as the one to break it up. It looked bad. She knew it did, and their hatred for her was expected and fair.

It still hurt though. It hurt a lot.

As Dawnstar entered camp, she trained herself to ignore the few lingering stares and kept herself composed. She had to remain strong and she wasn't going to allow superficial affairs to taint her determination to her rank.

Though before she sauntered to her den, her eyes fell on Leopardlune outside the nursery as she bathed in the sun's warmth, her kits running around her excitedly.

Dawnstar slowly approached her friend and lightly tapped her
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shoulder with her tail, smiling gently as copper eyes opened to meet her own gaze.

"Hey you." Leopardlune purred as she motioned for the leader to sit beside her, in which she did. A comfortable silence fell between them and she just listened to the drowned out giggling from her friend's kits.

"How are you, you know," she paused hesitantly, "given the circumstances?"

"I'll be okay." Dawnstar reassured as she let her head lay on her paws. "They're mad at me. Honestly, I don't get why you're not."

Leopardlune was quiet, her eyes nothing but concentrated as she dwelled over her answer.

"In all honesty," she finally spoke as she looked down to her pale friend, "I'm biased. I am. What you did was *questionable* to say the least, but you're my best friend, and I'm biased."

Dawnstar just looked at her, though she wasn't given the chance to respond as something rammed into her head.

"Ow!" Cranekit chirped as she stammered to her paws. "Mom! Stonekit pushed me!"

"I did not." Stonekit grumbled, though she didn't miss the mischievous glance in his eyes. "You're just clumsy."

"I am *not* clumsy." Cranekit retorted before she flung herself into him and the two grew into a ball of fur and giggles.

"I love them to death, but StarClan I need a break." Leopardlune sighed as she stretched out her limbs, letting the remaining rays of the sun soak them up.

Dawnstar weakly laughed, though she didn't respond as the two were greeted by Risingflame, the warrior offering them a bright smile. She was the only one besides Leopardlune who wasn't giving Dawnstar silent eye daggers.

"They're getting so big." Risingflame commented as she sat in front of them with a rabbit, tail curling around her paws.

"Tell me about it." Leopardlune groaned which resulted in a laugh from Dawnstar's former apprentice.

"They'll be about apprentices when your kits are born, Dawnstar." Risingflame spoke.

"They'll have a moon and a half together, maybe two if they'd hurry up." Dawnstar deadpanned, though the three just quietly laughed.

It wasn't until Risingflame spoke again that she froze.

"Nightglow isn't around much. You two don't even seem to be on speaking terms." She spoke freely, clearly unaware of the intrusive question. "It's not my business, but I'm just really curious. What's up with you two?"

"You're right, it's not any of your business." She instantly retorted, her voice not hiding any of its defense as she quickly got up and left the two alone in a wake of confusion.

Dawnstar instantly began looking for the familiar dark-pelted tomcat until she found him by himself, huddled up in a secluded area of camp as he ate a mouse.

"Come with me." She demanded as she approached him.

Nightglow looked up, his eyes unreadable but he listened and reluctantly followed.

It was as if she was consumed in a trance, her paranoia blinding her from the line which separated right and wrong. She was selfish; she knew she was. She didn't like it, but Dawnstar wasn't going to lie to herself. She'd do anything to protect herself, even if that meant hurting others.

But she didn't lack empathy. Truthfully, she wished she did. It would make this all so much easier.

As she reached a secluded area, the pale leader turned to face the

apathetic tomcat who had silently followed her. It was strange to see such a vivacious cat so callous, but weirdly made it easier. Seeing him match her temperament eased her guilt.

"You aren't being persuasive enough." She said flatly, her eyes not wavering once and neither were his.

"What does that even mean?" He retorted back, his eyes flickering with slight confusion though the anger built beneath lurked so vividly.

"You heard me. You know what I mean." She spurred back, teeth gritting. "These kits are about to come and we look like we hate each other."

"We do hate each other." Nightglow snarled in return, his ears pinned. "Or at least, I hate *you*."

"This isn't about who hates who more." Dawnstar replied, retaining any emotion in her voice as she tipped her chin. "So I need you to convince them."

"You're delusional." Nightglow scoffed.

"Maybe." Dawnstar muttered, nearly to herself, inaudibly. Her eyes were unfocused, her mind colliding. Everything around her felt heightened; the grass between her paws, the chilling breeze of early leaf-fall, the way every fur on her body felt unkempt or the sun which glared so mercilessly in her face. It all felt so powerful and it was all stressing her out, almost like a sensory overload. She was feeling too much but thinking so little.

"I'm not asking again. I'm not even asking. I'm *demanding."* Dawnstar spoke, each word just as threatening as the next. "I'm not afraid to do something drastic, Nightglow, so you are going to walk into that camp with me and you aren't going to leave my side. When cats ask about the kits, you will smile and you will *happily* discuss your excitement over being a father. Do you hear me? Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"Clearly." He spoke, his voice low and defeated, his eyes solemn yet

so clearly torn. Her authority was no match to his immaturity; to his lack of understanding.

He understood one thing, though.

He understood her words, he understood her silent threats and he understood that he didn't have the willpower to fight her over it.

Nightglow was weak-minded.

Dawnstar abused it.

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"This war has been going on for too long. I don't understand your motive so please, enlighten me. What is your plan? Let us sit around and take every one of SpringClan's attacks?"

The words of annoyance fell from the mouth of Frostbird. She was always cross and the leader was growing her own frustration with the pale warrior's constant doubts and disrespect.

"The past two moons have been peaceful. Who's to say they've just," Lionglare paused, hesitance clear in his voice and fear obvious in his fidgety movements, "*forgot about it?"*

"Forgot about it? You mean forgot the war *they* pursued? This is how Ivystar plays; she attacks, she waits and right when we think we're in the clear, she attacks again. Why can't you all get that through your thick skulls. She's playing us and we have just taken every beating." Goldenfell hissed.

"Just stop your complaining." Dawnstar retorted, not concealing the edge in her voice. "Every time we've taken charge and attacked, we've lost and we *cannot* handle another loss. We have a whole new beast to take on now. *Everything has changed."*

"She's right." Brinebloom spoke this time from where he was in the corner, the shadows making him nearly unseeable. "We're not going against just SpringClan anymore."

"So what?" Frostbird snapped, eyes widened as she glared at them
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all. "We're just sitting ducks? We might as well surrender now, and surrender all of our dignity along with it."

"She has a point." Lionglare spoke, his voice the only one not borderline screaming. "Is it really worth it?"

"Is that seriously a question?" Dawnstar growled as she stood to her paws, tail lashing. "Surrender ourselves? We've lost battle after battle. Do you understand the vulnerability that puts us at? If we surrender, we'll be known as the weak link. Ivystar wanted Fishcape, but if she notices the hold she has over us, she may want more. We cannot afford another defeat!"

Everyone was silent now and Dawnstar felt herself shift. The nerves were making her stomach hurt in ways unimaginable and she could literally *feel* her stomach tightening, the pressure making her involuntarily whimper.

This elicited a reaction from the gathered cats, though the reaction was short-lived as their attention was then stirred to desperate screams echoing outside her den.

"That was Leopardlune." Brinebloom spoke immediately as he sprung to his paws, the siblings sharing an unreadable look until everyone rushed outside to be met a frantic bengal, spurring words Dawnstar couldn't even hear.

However Dawnstar didn't need to hear as she met Leopardlune's horrified stare just to find herself instantly shifting her gaze to the influx of warriors creeping through the barrier against camp.

"No." She muttered, ears pinning. Dawnstar felt her body tighten, the nerves in her stomach only getting worse as the shooting pains got more prominent.

"Leopardlune! Get to the nursery!" She heard Brinebloom scream, eyes fixated as the frightened queen nodded and rushed to the den, nearly dragging her kits in with her.

Dawnstar didn't even have time to call an attack as she watched her clan mix with the attacking clans, the yowls of terror so loud that

she swore her ears would bleed.

Finally, Dawnstar pushed the tightening pain in her stomach to the back of her mind as she began to target an opponent.

Harvestleaf was who she saw first, claw-and-claw with Redgrowl and Frozenlily. The leader allowed her claws to flex in the grass beneath her, teeth bared as she prepared for an attack.

"Wait!"

Dawnstar instantly paused to meet the voice; Brinebloom. Graypetal was behind him.

"Are you crazy?" Her brother hissed as he blocked her way, though her attention was soon brought to the approaching form of a SummerClan warrior.

"Get out of my way." She snarled, her voice low and demanding as her gaze flickered from Brinebloom to the approaching SummerClan warrior.

"You're pregnant for StarClan's sake!" Brinebloom fretted, however she didn't get to respond as she was getting pushed back by Graypetal and her brother flung himself on the approaching warrior.

"Get your paws off-" Dawnstar was cut off by a jolting strike in her stomach, the most painful one yet. This evoked a concerned look from her former mentor.

"We have to get out of here." He muttered, looking around every other second to make sure no one was coming.

"No! I have to fight!" She urged, flinching as another pain rippled within her stomach which caused her to wince.

"Dawnstar you *can't* fight," Graypetal's voice was immediate and urgent, the terror within his gaze enough to make her listen,

"you're going into labor."

chapter 30

Her entire concept of time was stilled and it was just her and the world. The cruel, relentless world.

Swanflutter always told her to appreciate the beauty of the world but she didn't find anything beautiful. Not anymore. She figured if everyone viewed everything as *beautiful,* they were deluded. She knew. She knew because she experienced it firsthand.

The truth wasn't very beautiful. It was ugly and it was painful.

As every contraction convulsed inside of her, Dawnstar found herself slipping in and out of her thoughts, replacing them with the agonizing pain that rippled within her and left her with only minutes of solace.

Graypetal was by her side, constantly aiding her and helping her through the process. Half of her felt eased to have her former mentor with her, however another part of her just wanted him to leave and let her deal with it on her own.

"Graypetal!"

Dawnstar lifted her head immediately as a frantic voice screamed in her ears just to see Hiddenpaw, her deep blue eyes full of terror.

"They're coming! They're coming to the medicine cat den!" The gray-black medicine cat apprentice urged, her fear not easing Dawnstar's own lurking nerves. Despite her flaky conscience, she knew of the dire situation they were being placed in. They were completely vulnerable to an attack, and she couldn't do anything to help.

Dawnstar wasn't left to dwell on the thoughts for long as an involuntary scream left her mouth, the pain getting immensely more intense.

"These kits are coming *now."* Graypetal hissed, quickly grabbing a few herbs as Hiddenpaw looked behind her to see the approaching warriors.

"I can't!" Dawnstar finally heaved out, her breathing growing labored. "I can't right now! They aren't safe!"

Her gaze lingered with Graypetal's and everything seemed to stop. The screaming yowls outside. Her rushing heartbeat. Everything.

"Spottedbee! Risingflame!" Hiddenpaw yelped, the enthusiasm and relief in her voice enough to let Dawnstar relax.

Time was fast now. It was so unbelievably fast.

She felt numb. She felt completely and utterly numb. Every sensation was stilled. Every thought was faint. Every sound was silenced.

"A she-kit!"

She heard faintly. So faintly that she wasn't even sure she was hearing correctly.

Another kit came; a tom this time.

"You're doing great, Dawnstar." Graypetal assured, the smile on his face blurred between her hazed vision.

"Doesn't feel like it." She croaked out, a rasp lining the edge of her voice. Both Graypetal and Hiddenpaw laughed softly, the serenity in the both of them calming her down.

Eventually another kit came.

"She looks just like you." Hiddenpaw purred, deep ocean blue eyes warm.

"Hey you guys." Risingflame spoke, announcing her greeting silently with a flick of her tail. "Dawnstar! They're so cute." She grinned.

"Shouldn't you be out fighting?" Dawnstar rasped.

"I was, sent that SpringClan cat running. Even had his tail between his legs!" Risingflame boasted.

"You're not supposed to be here." Graypetal spoke as he was sorting through herbs, Hiddenpaw cleaning the kits as Dawnstar was too weak to do so.

"You really think I, of all cats, cares?" Risingflame nearly hummed which resulted in a scoff from her mentor.

"Trust me, she'll do anything you tell her not to in spite of it." The leader grumbled, however the two shared a halfhearted grin.

"What can I say, I love nothing more than to get under your fur." The young molly spoke, green eyes burning with the thrill of her previous fight. The moment grew quiet except for the hitched breathing from her former apprentice and herself, however she felt alarm seep back in as rustling foliage hummed in her ears.

Dawnstar's tail instinctively curled over the three kits by her side and she instantly felt herself grow restrained by Graypetal, however she wasn't left to retort as another pain rippled inside of her.

"You have a thing for bad timing or something?" Risingflame instantly spoke, a slightly horrified smile crossing her face. It was the first time Dawnstar had ever seen the she-cat so scared.

"Something like that." She rasped, claws flexing in her battered nest.

"I thought there were only three." Graypetal whispered quietly, motioning for Hiddenpaw to fetch a stick.

"There's *another?"* Dawnstar groaned, however her frustration was turned into dread as two unfamiliar scents entered her nose.

"Intruders!" Hiddenpaw hissed, tripping over her own paws as she fled to Graypetal's side.

"Don't worry," Risingflame reassured, a strained, non-confident smile crossing her face, "I'll keep them away."

Dawnstar scrunched her nose as her stomach tightened, however

before she could say anything, Risingflame was gone, off to defend Dawnstar and her kits without a second thought.

Eventually a fourth and final kit came; a dainty tom. He had short, soft golden-beige fur.

Just like Luca.

Dawnstar just stared at them, trying to force herself to stay awake, but slowly she could feel her paws growing numb. Then her legs. Then every part of her was completely paralyzed.

She knew what was happening and she didn't even have the strength to fight it.

"Send me back."

The words left her mouth instantly as her paws met a nearly feathery surface, pale yet bright colors blinding her for a few lingering seconds.

"We need to talk."

"Sunstar," Dawnstar hissed, "send me back *now*. I lost a life. I get it. I don't need a recap. I'm very much aware."

"I think-"

"I don't *care* what you think! Send me back! I need to make sure my kits are okay!" Her words were growing more desperate and the disappointment within his gaze was only peeving her off more.

"Fine. I can do it myself." The white she-cat finally snarled as she brushed past him, ignoring his pleas as she dipped her nose into the pool of water. She didn't have time to listen to his lectures. Not now.

Once again she was deprived from sensation. Deprived from consciousness. She faltered between the line which danced around life and death, desensitization completely consuming her.

As feeling began to settle, Dawnstar felt herself slowly awaken with

immediate anxiety running up and down her chest, enough to almost make her want to throw up.

"Welcome back."

A hazed voice nearly whispered in her ears, one nearly inaudible that she wasn't even sure she was hearing it, or making it up.

Dawnstar's eyes finally opened, blurred lights blending together at first before she met typically apathetic yellow eyes.

"My kits." She breathed out, trying to sit up however she was gently held back by Hiddenpaw.

"They're fine. You're all fine." The medicine cat apprentice soothed and Dawnstar just nodded weakly, finally looking down to the four little lives nestled in her stomach. It was a strange feeling; not one she expected to feel and not one she entirely liked.

However Dawnstar wasn't left to dwell on her troubled mind as the surrender call was called, her stomach dropping.

It was Brinebloom who had called it.

FallClan was defeated once again.

Dawnstar didn't hesitate as she instantly got to her paws, growing lightheaded almost immediately and nearly tripping over her paws until Hiddenpaw caught her.

"You just gave birth to four kits and lost a life, you need to rest." Graypetal demanded as he approached them, herbs already placed out beside him. "I have poppy seeds to help you sleep."

"No, I have to see my clan. I have to make sure they're okay." She argued, sharing a long stare with her mentor until he finally sighed in reluctance.

"Fine. But you're staying by my side." He ordered before looking to his apprentice. "Stay with the kits. Keep them warm."

Hiddenpaw seemed like she was about to argue, but eventually she

just nodded as she began moving them to a cleaner nest.

Dawnstar leaned on Graypetal for support as he guided her out of the den and to her surprise, the moon had completely settled in the night sky. The thick, acrid tang of blood tainted the fear-engulfed air and with every step she took, strikes of anxiety streamed down her chest.

It wasn't until she saw Leopardlune, laying on her side and unconscious, that every logical thought in her mind completely vanished.

"Mommy! Mommy wake up!" Stonekit cried out as he tugged on his mother's ear, eyes blurry with tears.

"She's just sleeping. She's tired, Stonekit." Cranekit reasoned, however her own voice quivered with fear.

"Mom!" Stonekit screamed once more, this time much more vigorously as he pulled at her ear. "Mom *please* wake up! I need you!"

"Stonekit she's sleeping! She's okay!" Cranekit cried back, her eyes fully traumatized as she tried to not only convince her brother, but herself.

Dawnstar felt her legs buckle beneath her.

No. I can't lose you too.

Dawnstar watched as Brinebloom appeared, brief horror flickering within his gaze however he quickly masked his fear to remain strong for his kits.

"Dad! Wake mom up! Wake her up!" Cranekit begged.

Brinebloom seemed too stunned to speak, but finally he looked up, his eyes immediately locking with Dawnstar's. His gaze was unreadable and she hated the way everything was moving so slowly.

Dawnstar finally took her gaze away as she watched Graypetal

approach her body, and somehow she was able to sit beside him.

"You can both breathe." Graypetal exhaled shakily, relief rushing off of him in waves. "She's alive."

Alive. She was alive.

"Did you hear that kits?" Brinebloom lulled, his voice breathless with relief. "She's okay."

Dawnstar watched as her brother curled his tail around the two kittens, both now nestled in their father's side, the family watching as Graypetal began tending to her friend. Her worries completely subsided as the bengal slowly awoke and was eagerly met with warmth and affection.

It was a bittersweet image however the she-cat couldn't erase the hint of envy which lurked so feverishly within her.

She was happy her friend was alive. Truth be told, Dawnstar wasn't sure she could've handled the loss of Leopardlune, though the jealousy still existed no matter how hard she tried to think it away.

Dawnstar decided to allow the family their moment's privacy as she looked around, abhorred by the sights she saw. Her clan was battered and bruised, not only physically but mentally as well.

Her gaze soon landed on Spottedbee. He had a huge gash on his throat and his entire body was drenched in blood.

He wasn't going to make it. It didn't take a genius to know that.

However Dawnstar's attention was quickly grabbed by a small crowd consisting of Frostbird, Redgrowl, Oceanmist and Shadeheart.

Part of her *knew* she didn't want to see what was being crowded because *all of her* knew what it was. She knew what it was and she knew she didn't have the emotional strength to handle it.

However there she was, approaching the group.

It was always a nice feeling, predicting something, or getting a gut feeling correct.

But this was anything than nice. The very opposite, in fact.

Dawnstar looked down to see Risingflame, blood dripping from her mouth. She didn't have any huge external injuries, however the blood which kept excessively dripping from her nose and mouth was enough to inform Dawnstar that it wasn't good.

"We need to get Graypetal." Dawnstar urged, however the family just looked at her with desolate stares.

"We all know she can't be fixed." Redgrowl mumbled.

"She's your sister! How can you just give up-"

"Dawnstar," Risingflame croaked out, green eyes just as bright as ever, "me and Spottedbee had this whole plan, you know?" She rasped, half-laughing half-coughing as blood splurged from her mouth.

"What do," Dawnstar paused slowly, "what do you mean?"

"A sneak attack. Genius, right?" She joked, her voice growing weaker. "He was gonna attack at their level, me from above. I had been hiding on a branch."

Dawnstar just stared, confusion completely clouding her vision as she waited for the she-cat to continue.

"The funniest part," Risingflame heaved, "it's my fault. I completely miscalculated and hit another branch. I mean, we're cats. We should be coordinated." She weakly chuckled, coughing as she did.

"Nothing is funny about this." Dawnstar hissed, however the concern in her voice was clear.

"You're right. It's not." Risingflame finally responded, every bit of sarcasm gone as her chest rose and fell with each forced breath.

Eventually Graypetal joined them and the leader desperately met

his gaze, silently pleading for him to fix her. The medicine cat began examining the wounded she-cat and she finally felt herself relax.

"Graypetal, tell me please." Risingflame spoke quietly, her rounded eyes meeting his, "It's okay, I can handle it."

"When you hit the branch," Graypetal spoke, his eyes nothing but defeated, "you hit so hard that the trauma has caused a bleed."

"She's not bleeding, she doesn't even have a scratch." Dawnstar muttered, however she knew of the idiocy within her words. She knew she was helpless in this situation and she knew that this was irreversible.

"I'm bleeding internally." Risingflame whispered, her voice so delicate, however something else, something— *accepting* almost— tainted it.

"Yes. Yes you're bleeding internally." Graypetal answered as he began to nudge some poppy seeds to her.

"Here. This will ease your shock."

"I'm not shocked." Risingflame corrected as she ignored the seeds being pushed towards her. "*Trauma by impact.* That sounds so neat, doesn't it? Makes dying almost sound cool."

"Risingflame!" Frostbird hissed, however the mother's eyes were brimming with tears. "Can you go a minute without making inappropriate jokes?"

"They're not funny." Oceanmist grumbled, her eyes red and tear-stained. "You're *not dying."*

But she was.

The assembled cats all fell quiet as more began to surround the dying warrior. At first Dawnstar wanted to command them to leave, to selfishly allow her to have these final moments with her apprentice alone.

But that wasn't fair.

"Where's Spottedbee?" Risingflame heaved as she looked around. "If you're all here to watch me die— which is a little creepy might I add— I'd want him here. We make a pretty good team."

Dawnstar felt herself shatter at her words, her gaze instantly meeting Graypetal's in a quick moment of panic, however the medicine cat was much calmer than she was.

"He's getting treated by Hiddenpaw right now." Graypetal whispered in her ear. At the same time, Dawnstar lifted her head, eyes trailing to meet Spottedbee's lifeless body away from the crowd.

"*Liar."* Risingflame laughed weakly, however her laughs soon turned into small cries. Dawnstar watched in silence as the family said their goodbyes and the clan watched quietly.

Despite the tragedy of it all, this was the most unified her clan had been in moons and the amalgamation brought them together. Maybe this was the wake up call they all needed.

"Dawnstar." Risingflame spoke, her voice getting noticeably more forced and weak. The leader slowly approached the young warrior and settled beside her, forcing her own tears back by habit.

"I know I have big talk," the beige warrior began, "but really, I've always looked up to you. It's a little embarrassing to admit. I always hoped I would tell you when you're old and and your muzzle is all gray but I don't think I have that long." She mused, however her words were much softer now; genuine.

"*The* Risingflame*? Looking up to me?"* Dawnstar matched her joking tone, however the trembling in her voice was clear enough to express her pain.

"Don't flatter yourself." Risingflame fired back, however the two just laughed at each other, tears falling from both of their eyes now.

Finally, the cream-beige warrior laid her head down, eyes staring at the night sky. They gleamed ever-so-slightly in the cascading

moonlight, the light making her fur glow a nearly golden hue.

"Won't be long now." Dawnstar heard Graypetal whisper, his voice soft as he rested his paw comfortingly on the dying warrior's paw.

He was right. Risingflame closed her eyes and allowed herself one more breath, then suddenly, her chest stopped rising.

Thinking back on it, it finally clicked on why she was acting so weird when she was in the medicine cat den. Maybe if someone had just noticed sooner, this could've all been prevented and maybe she'd still be alive.

As Dawnstar stared down at her dead apprentice, her sadness was gone. Her grief was numbed. Her mind was clear.

It was so clear.

However one single thought crossed it.

One single emotion she embraced; she allowed herself to surrender to it, letting it control her, consume her and craft a new version of herself.

Anger.

It had been growing. She could feel the stronger pull it had on her, whispering silent wants, pushing her to cave into the satisfaction of victory.

Dawnstar drowned out the saddened, muffled cries that lulled softly in her ears. Instead, she stared at Risingflame's dead body, letting a montage of memories fuel the fire of hatred burning within her.

There was a line, a very faint, gray line which separated justice and vengeance. A moral line which waved between the two, painting them in different colors, pushing them into different lights.

Justice; just behavior or treatment.

Dawnstar mentally scoffed.

Vengeance; punishment inflicted or retribution exacted for an injury or wrong.

Punishment. Infliction.

Dawnstar didn't want just. She didn't want decency. She didn't want integrity.

She wanted them to hurt. She wanted them to hurt and she wanted the pain to come from her own paws. Their vitality was a liability in the sense of her troubled mind. She blamed them for everything.

Maybe it wasn't fair but the rage which churned inside of her was merciless, even Dawnstar was growing wary of what she was capable of, but her wrath was too strong to be overthrown.

She was ready.

She was ready to do whatever it takes to ensure her clan not only survives this war, but *wins it.*

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lex from the future here; so i had everyone's family trees mapped out before writing grim hollow and never even realized until now that spottedbee is literally risingflame's father. continuity error on my end, but makes this whole thing so much more depressing.

chapter 31

I'm so tired of being here
Suppressed by all my childish fears
And if you have to leave
I wish that you would just leave
'Cause your presence still lingers here
And it won't leave me alone

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"If I could put all your pain on me, I'd do it. You know that, right?" Leopardlune mewed, her voice holding a fragility that it didn't typically adorn.

"I wouldn't let you." Dawnstar murmured quietly.

"Always so stubborn." Leopardlune mused, however the leader was too weak to laugh. She just wanted to sleep, but she couldn't. No matter how hard she tried, it wouldn't come.

They sat in a quiet silence for a moment, Dawnstar's eyes flickering down at the four bundles in her belly. It had been around three days since the attack, and the three most unreal days. She felt as though she was constantly walking on eggshells.

"You have to name them, you know." Leopardlune murmured in which her friend just shrugged.

Dawnstar didn't want the kits at first. She viewed them as an obstacle in her way to victory. Eventually she was able to overcome her uncontrollable dislike for her kits and maybe even a part of her was excited.

But now she felt hopeless and her anxiety was the worst she had ever experienced. She felt as if a rain cloud was constantly hovering over her head.

She wasn't sure she even loved them, and she hated herself for that. What was wrong with her? Why couldn't she care more? Why couldn't she feel the strength of the mother's love she always heard about? *Why was she so sad?*

She tried to calm herself down, telling herself that if she didn't care about the kits, she wouldn't have been so worried about them during her kitting- and maybe her sadness stemmed from the death of her apprentice.

There wasn't anything wrong with her, right?

"The eldest should be Maplekit." Leopardlune interrupted her thoughts as she looked down at the cream-white kitten. "Remember when we'd always see who could climb the highest on that huge maple tree as apprentices?"

"Yeah I remember." Dawnstar replied, embracing the nostalgia of the moment. She remembered Leopardlune would always say she could climb the highest, but Brinebloom beat her every single time while the others just watched and laughed.

Times were much simpler back then.

"I like Maplekit." Dawnstar agreed, however she then looked down to the white-gray kitten by her chest.

"When I was giving birth to them, it was as if for just a moment, the war outside had stopped and they were the calm to the storm." Dawnstar explained.

"Stormkit." Leopardlune mewed, in which her friend nodded in agreement.

"Ivorykit for my twin." Dawnstar then spoke, blue eyes glued on the purely white kitten curled up beside Maplekit. She remembered one of her conversations with Luca; he had called Ivystar that and though she'd never tell him, she found it funny.

"What about the little one?" Leopardlune queried as they looked down at the youngest kit. Though they were young, his resemblance to his true father was uncanny.

"I have the perfect name for him." Dawnstar spoke, her eyes meeting her friend's with warmth. Leopardlune just looked at her, curiosity flickering beneath copper eyes.

"Lunekit." Dawnstar purred and her friend's gaze instantly brightened in the dim light.

"I'm flattered." She grinned and Dawnstar just gave her a strained smile.

However the sadness didn't waver. The anxiety didn't still. She looked at the kits at her stomach and she felt terrified, like she was looking at strangers.

They felt like strangers to her.

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"I don't think Graypetal is going to appreciate you being on a patrol. Don't you have kits to care for?" Silverpool commented and the leader didn't miss the warning glare she was given by Lionglare.

"I don't think it's any of your business." Dawnstar snapped, Silverpool just giving her a side look of distaste.

"I don't think we have anything to worry about in regards to an attack. Like you said, Ivystar attacks then waits until we think we're in the clear." Lionglare then spoke, obviously trying to change the subject.

"That was before they had a whole other clan on their side." Fernflicker spoke up, the final cat on the patrol.

"Why would they attack again? It's clear that they've won. What else could they want from us?" Silverpool reasoned.

"They want us to officially surrender, and they won't stop until we do. They want to see the satisfaction of defeat on our faces." Dawnstar spoke, her voice completely apathetic.

"Then maybe we should. We aren't going to win this, and you're delusional if you think we will." Silverpool spoke, and this sparked
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an instant reaction out of her.

"If you are too weak to do what needs to be done, you can *leave*. FallClan is built on strength and if you can't handle that, we don't want you here. We will win, you just have to be patient but I suppose you all lack that!" The white molly vented as the gathered cats fell quiet, blue eyes full of pent up fury.

"We are uh," Lionglare paused hesitantly, "at the border. Should probably mark it..."

"Whatever. I'll go south, you all can figure the rest out. Meet back here." Dawnstar ordered and before they could argue, she was heading away.

Her building frustration was concerning. Her hatred for Ivystar was getting uncontrollable. Her thirst for vengeance was growing untamable.

She wasn't sure she could feel something so deeply, but Dawnstar knew that if Ivystar was in front of her, she would kill her. Life by life.

It terrified her.

It also excited her.

"Dawnstar! I found you!"

Dawnstar paused abruptly, feeling every inch of dread crawl up her chest as she met lively green eyes. *This can't be happening.*

Luca.

"You haven't been at our meeting spot in days and I was growing worried- Dawn, you've had them!" He purred, his eyes wide and full of newfound elation.

"Oh," she paused cautiously, "yes, I've had them. I've been too weak to come see you. I apologize." The words fell awkwardly from her tongue.

Luca stared at her with his typically bright eyes, consumed in their usual euphoria. It was painful almost, like he was *too happy*. It made her mad to see someone so genuinely good.

Not mad really, more like envious.

"Can I see them? I'm ready, you have no idea how hard I've been training for this." Luca began rambling, the way his voice got continuously higher making her claws flex.

"No."

Luca went quiet, the elation on his face slowly shifting into something much more confused, green eyes laced with something Dawnstar wasn't able to read.

"*What?"* He breathed out, tail curling slowly behind him. "What do you mean *no?"* There was an unfamiliar edge to his voice, one entirely foreign to her.

"No. You can't see them." Her words held a higher confidence than before. She knew she had to be assertive, even if she didn't want to.

Though truthfully, to know she had so much power was a little too thrilling. To know that she held importance over others was *exhilarating*.

"Why not?" Luca queried almost immediately, a slightly knowing look lurking beneath sullen green eyes. "When can I?"

"Never." She didn't waver. She didn't keep him guessing. She wanted him to know, and she wanted it to be clear.

The look of dread which crossed his face was painful. It was. He had spent the last two moons completely changing his life for these kits and she let him do it knowing he was never going to be apart of their lives.

Maybe she should've told him sooner. Maybe she shouldn't have told him at all.

Dawnstar didn't know what literal heartbreak looked like, she may

have felt it, but never seen it. Not until now. Not until she saw the way Luca's eyes shifted from confusion to pain.

Dawnstar didn't remove her gaze from him, allowing herself to prepare for the pleading and the sobbing.

It never came.

Instead, something entirely new became of him. Something she didn't even know he had in him.

Anger.

"*Two moons."* His words were fragile but they didn't lack fury. "I spent two whole moons completely changing myself and my life plans to be a father to these kits. I spent hours training *every single day* and now you're telling me *no?* Just like that?"

"Yes." She replied flatly, chin tipping just slightly as his hot breath danced between them both.

"You're kidding me." Luca scoffed as he began to circle her, eyes set dead on his paws as his tail lashed to and fro slowly. "Then go, go back home to *my kits* just to send them off to be used as weapons."

"Excuse me?" Dawnstar snarled.

"You heard me." Luca hissed in return, his chest rising and falling heavily as his eyes fell into callous slits, ears pinned before he continued.

"You know I've been thinking a lot. I've had to make a lot of changes to my life ever since the announcement of these kits, but I was okay with it. I didn't plan it, but I wasn't mad about it. Not at all." Luca started, his words breathless and gaze unwavering. "Then I started thinking of the life I wanted them to live and the environment I wanted them to grow up in and I came to a realization."

"And what was that?" Dawnstar snickered lowly, her own claws flexing in the ground beneath her. Whatever part of her even cared about Luca was numbed. She was furious with him, and with the

built up emotions she was containing because of her need for control, her anger didn't mix very well.

"When I was six moons old, I was playing with my sisters in the meadow. When you clan cats are six moons, you're sent off to train for, what exactly? Constant war?" Luca lulled, head tilting as he looked at her with mocking green eyes. "They're still kits at that age! They don't have the strength or the emotional maturity to handle war violence!"

"I'll have you-"

"*No,"* Luca interrupted her, "it's time you *wake up* and realize the whole system is broken, composed by a group of close-minded individuals who need to grow up and realize they aren't living in a daydream! Your 'dead cat ancestors' don't care if you allow other blood in because they don't exist! At this point your clan and their borders just coexist in an endless chain of violence, living together and killing each other at the slightest wrong move. How can you live like this? How can anyone live like this?"

Dawnstar felt herself freeze at his words, opening her mouth to speak but nothing came out. What was there to say? He was right, she knew he was, somewhere deep within her that moral compass kept screaming.

But her fear was stronger. Her thirst for control was stronger. *Her need for victory was stronger.*

"Just look at yourself, Dawnstar!" He reasoned, tail lashing rapidly as his eyes burned fiercely within her's. "You said you were barely a warrior when you ascended. Maybe that's why the whole system is flawed, just different groups of violent cats being lead by borderline kits who don't have the maturity to handle how tedious clan politics are!"

"I," Dawnstar paused slowly, eyes drifting from each of his frantically as words fumbled in her mouth and got caught in her throat, "you don't understand." She finally whispered, though it was nearly inaudible and Luca seemed too wrapped up in his own fury to hear as he continued on.

"I mean you dragged me into the middle of it the first day we met and now you refuse me my deserved right to see my own kits because of your clan's tyranny against blood that isn't pure?" He questioned, his breathing much more labored as his stare deepened. "Please, correct me if I'm wrong. Correct me if you don't send off kits to become weapons to fight in an endless chain of violence before they turn into actual war criminals that blindly follow 'StarClan' and abide by a set of repressive rules you call a code which do nothing but restrain any kind of freedom or originality!"

"We had different upbringings, Luca." Dawnstar hissed in response, growing more credence in her tone. "Some of us have to grow up faster than others."

"That's my point Dawn! You shouldn't be forced to grow up so early because of the constant violence that looms over you all! Why border next to cats if it's just to fight and die at any given chance? It's not honorable. It's stupid." Luca recoiled after he was silence for a moment, letting himself calm down before continuing with more tranquility. "I won't have my kits live in such a corrupt place, so I'm taking them and I won't let you get in my way."

She wasn't sure she was hearing correctly at first. Surely Luca didn't just *threaten her?* No, no that's impossible.

Yet he did.

He did and it made her enraged, as if she was being filled by a pool of fury that was pricked by a little needle, the water coming out at higher pressures than can be sustained.

"Luca, leave now."

"No." He growled, his own claws flexing beneath him as his tongue curled around his teeth, eyes barely visible as they fell into thinned slits.

She didn't have much time before her patrol would return and she didn't have much patience to deal with him. After today, any positive memory she had of Luca was replaced with something much more negative.

She assumed he wasn't too happy with her either, because the next thing she knew, claws were heading straight for her.

Much more calculated claws than she would've given him credit for.

However she was able to swiftly dodge the attack and sent her own claws to his cheek, the warm flow of crimson liquid staining her pale paw. The whimper which followed wasn't satisfying though, not like it normally was whenever she was able to get a good hit. She wasn't sure what Luca was, but something in her did care about him, though it was deeply buried by hatred and fear.

Dawnstar was able to get another slash across his chest, his own claws giving her a few scratches though not nearly as deeply as her own claws marked.

"Train all you want Luca," she hissed between gritted teeth as claws met his shoulder, "you'll never amount to my skill." She sneered, claws curling then ripping forward as he yelped in agony.

Suddenly an acrid scent stung her nose, the ferocity of it causing her eyes to swell with tears as she pinned Luca to the ground, claws digging into his chest as they both began coughing, her vision growing hazy.

Screams began ringing in her ears, inaudible yet growing closer and clearly frantic, the intoxicated air beginning to fill her lungs.

"Dawnstar!" She finally heard, the voice strained and cough-ridden. It was Frostbird.

Dawnstar ignored her as her claws kept slashing down at the sandy tomcat beneath her, his body convulsing beneath from a mixture of her angered strikes and his uncontrollable coughing.

"Dawnstar!" Frostbird screamed once more, her voice much more desperate this time. "*Fire!*"

It was another moment which lacked clarity. Dawnstar heard her words, loud and clearly, but something in her mind was much more prominent. Her unkempt fury.

But eventually her own coughing grew too uncontrollable and she was consumed in a cloud of smoke, Luca's battered body still beneath her. Dawnstar stepped off shakily, eyes straining to see.

Faintly, she could see him moving, usually clean fur drenched in blood.

"Dawnstar, we *have to go.* Fernflicker and Lionglare are already heading home to warn the others!"

Dawnstar looked into the direction of the voice before looking back to Luca, her paws slowly backing up. She could feel tears falling from her eyes, but they weren't from the smoke.

It wasn't supposed to end this way, she thought painfully and before she knew it, the raging orange flames showed their horrid face as they consumed his body, causing the she-cat to flinch.

"Dawnstar *now!"* Frostbird hissed one final time. Dawnstar felt as though she was glued to place, as though she was too much weight for her paws to carry.

However eventually she was able to force herself to move, paws falling into the curves of the territory she knew so well as she began sprinting behind Frostbird, the air getting clearer as they put space between them and the building flames which followed.

Those mouse-brained twolegs and their need to play with fire.

Luckily the adrenaline pushed Luca out of her thoughts, his death all too sudden for her to digest. As they neared camp, her clan was seemingly consumed by delirium.

"D!" A familiar voice screeched and she met widened copper eyes; Leopardlune. Her two kits were trailing behind her. "Where do we go?"

Dawnstar was silent for a moment, staring at her friend as others began to gather. *Think, Dawnstar. You have to think.*

"WinterClan! Get everyone to WinterClan!" She demanded, the golden bengal nodding urgently as she began nosing her kittens in

the right direction. As others began to follow, Dawnstar immediately went into camp to ensure everyone got out. She noticed Oceanmist first, Shadeheart and Redgrowl following after her frantically as they fled.

"Brinebloom!" She called, blue meeting blue as she gazed at her brother. "Where are my kits?"

"Meadowlark and a few others have them!" He answered, his voice strained as the smoke drew closer. She nodded quickly before looking around one final time, though it appeared that her brother was getting the last of her clan out of camp.

Dawnstar crawled through a crack in the barrier of camp before being met by an expanse of trees, though she could only see so much as smoke continued consuming everything. Her heart was racing faster than it ever had before and Dawnstar could feel her her throat getting raspy as she began sprinting through the trees, undergrowth and foliage getting snagged into her pelt.

Dawnstar could feel her legs burning with every step, the sting in her throat and nose growing unbearable. The fire was spreading faster than she could run and Dawnstar had to watch as the merciless flames destroyed everything she had ever known.

"Help!"

Dawnstar skidded to a stop, ears perked as she looked around desperately through the smoke-engulfed forest, coughing as she tried following the pleads for help.

Eventually she could see blurred silhouettes, her paws carrying her to them with the remaining energy she had left only to be met by a frantic Goldenfell and Lakelily.

However it wasn't until Dawnstar looked down that her heart stopped. Below in the thickets were Meadowlark, Silverpool and Sagefrost, the flames not allowing her any route of rescuing them.

However she didn't care about them. Not right now.

"Meadowlark!" She hissed, eyes widened as her terrified gaze met

an equally terrified gaze. "Where are my kits?"

The she-cat pointed with her nose to the four kits, a little further up in the bush, though still not completely in the clear and still out of Dawnstar's reach.

"I tried," Meadowlark urged from where she was trapped, "I tried to get them out!" She spoke, her voice strained and apologetic as her eyes grew teary from fear.

"There's no way we can get to them, not from here." Lakelily hissed, his own breaths hitched.

"No!" Goldenfell snarled, though his eyes were widened with hopeless horror. "We *can't leave them!"*

Dawnstar felt herself slowly begin to dissociate, mentally cursing at herself. She couldn't blink out. Not now.

"Look!" Lakelily urged, the two instantly looking down to see Lionglare. The tomcat was much closer and was the only one able to rescue the trapped warriors and still have time to get out.

"Lionglare!" Goldenfell heaved, ears perked as newfound hope gleamed in his eyes. "*Thank StarClan!"*

She watched nervously as Lionglare slowly creeped toward the burning thicket bush, leaping from one log as he drew near, however Dawnstar felt herself stiffen as she watched his eyes shift from determination to a horrified realization.

"I can't get to them both!" Lionglare yelled out through gritted teeth, his voice husky with smoke as he looked back at them with distraught.

"Save my sister and the others! Leave the kits behind!" Goldenfell was quick to respond and this sparked something vile within her as Dawnstar looked at him with enraged blue eyes, though he just ignored her glare.

"Lionglare*!"* Dawnstar screamed, and for a single second he held her gaze. It was the longest second Dawnstar had ever experienced and

she swore the two held an entire conversation, as if they were having some mental agreement. *"Please."*

Lionglare froze and she watched as his gaze flickered from the trapped warriors to her kits, hesitance shining so evidently within his troubled gaze.

Dawnstar wasn't breathing. For so long she wasn't breathing, not until Lionglare closed his eyes for a brief moment and opened them with newfound determination. She watched as as he rushed to her kits and began to lead them to safety and the relief which flooded her was one of the most euphoric feelings.

"*No!"* Goldenfell and Lakelily both screeched in unison, but she disregarded them. Her kits were safe and that was all that mattered.

However Dawnstar didn't get to wallow in it for long as her vision came in and out, her entire body growing numb.

Suddenly, every inch of consciousness left her body until her mind was completely and utterly blank.

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Hey guys! I haven't done an author's note in a hot minute but I have a question for you all. You don't have to answer if you don't want to but I'm really curious what you guys would have to say!

Question: Can you empathize/sympathize at all with Dawnstar? Or do any of her actions make sense? Do you think she was a product of her environment or just born the way she was? Or do you think she's unjustifiable? Or are you kinda in-between? There's no right or wrong answer but I'm extremely curious on how other people perceive her psyche/motive. <3

chapter 32

I hate you for what you did
And I miss you like a little kid
I faked it every time, but that's alright
I can hardly feel anything, I hardly feel anything at all

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She could embody acceptance. Quite frankly, she found herself often having to adjust to change. She was used to it; change was familiar to her, ironic as it was.

Dawnstar was losing another life. She knew she was. She accepted it. She accepted the fear which loomed before reality faded and the fragility of her heartbeat stalled. She accepted the way every limb grew senseless and numb. She accepted the judgement she was about to receive from her dead ancestors.

Dawnstar couldn't keep defending herself, because every time her clarity was at a high and she was given a moment to breathe, she wasn't able to find justification for her actions. She knew they were wrong but she just couldn't stop.

Sometimes she wasn't even sure she wanted to.

However time kept passing; somewhat. Time didn't exist in death. However she felt internally and externally stuck, her vision still completely blinded by nothing.

Why wasn't the soft, feathery grass of StarClan greeting her paws? Why wasn't the healing aroma of morning pine and evergreen dancing around her nose? Why couldn't she hear the distant crashing of the waterfall? Why wasn't she met by the soft, starry copper gaze of Sunstar?

She was alone, paralyzed and blind. It was terrifying and the dread made her feel the constant need to throw up, however her paralysis

prevented her from so.

But eventually it was over, however Dawnstar wasn't met by Sunstar or the tranquil expanse of StarClan. Instead, she could feel sensation creep back through her paws and spread throughout every inch of her body.

"She's waking up!"

"Hush, give her time."

The words were faint yet familiar; Graypetal and Hiddenpaw. Dawnstar felt the tension ebb away form her body as full consciousness began to settle.

Eventually she let her eyes open slowly, the sunlight blaring as the light danced within her cerulean gaze.

"It's about time." Brinebloom spoke, his eyes completely dull, just as his words though she was almost positive she could hear a bit of relief within them.

"My kits." She heaved out, her breathing still slightly labored. Dawnstar watched as Graypetal and Brinebloom looked at each other for a brief moment and her head tilted in confusion.

"They're fine." Brinebloom assured, pausing for a slight moment. "Leopardlune has them."

His words only assured her slightly. Now she was filled with something much more confusing in the worst possible way as Brinebloom and Graypetal continued to look at each other, as if they were hiding something from her.

However Dawnstar wasn't left to dwell in her confusion as unfamiliar scents entered her nose and that began to stir new questions in her mind. *Where am I?*

"Greetings, Dawnstar. I'm glad to see you're okay." Gentle words cooed, and Dawnstar froze as her eyes met soft amber eyes.

"Thank you for allowing us into your home." Graypetal responded

hastily, seeing as she was too confused to answer.

"Of course." Viperstar mewed before looking back at her, warmth lurking so vividly within his gaze. "WinterClan gives our biggest condolences for the lives lost in this tragedy and we offer our home to you for however long you need. My warriors have already agreed to help in the reconstruction of your own home, as well."

Then it all hit her, and Dawnstar was left to soak up the aftermath of everything that happened. *The fire, the death of her warriors, Luca's death...*

"And please, feel free to use our herbs whenever you need. Graypetal has been so generous with helping us restore our stashes, and I'm more than happy to help with the injured." Another voice spoke up, one drenched with serenity.

Sandsong, the WinterClan medicine cat.

"I cannot thank you all enough." Dawnstar finally spoke as she looked at the gathered cats, though her words held truth. She almost forgot the other clans actually had morals.

"No need to, we help each other in need." Viperstar assured, and something with his words painted a very clear image in her head.

We help each other in need.

The question was, to what lengths?

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Weakness still lingered, however Dawnstar felt as though it was mainly within her mindset. Both Sandsong and Graypetal had kept her contained in the medicine cat den for days, both clearly confused in the slow progress of her recovery, but she hated being tucked away.

As she exited the den, it was obvious of the divide. She watched as WinterClan warriors kept away from the small sectioned off area which contained her own clan.
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Everyone except Hiddenpaw; she was deep in conversation with Fablepaw, the WinterClan medicine cat apprentice. It appeared as though the two were sharing knowledge, and for just a few fleeting moments, Dawnstar was reminded of the beauty and unity life so rarely held.

As she continued towards the little makeshift camp her clan had formed, she wasn't greeted at all. They seemingly ignored her, though she kept herself composed. They still hated her, but she didn't let them see her hurt.

Though her attention was soon grabbed by Lionglare, crouched in a shaded corner, his eyes lurking with something which inflicted a whole new level of depressing. She was hesitant at first, though Dawnstar eventually approached her old friend with curious eyes.

"What's wrong?" Her words were brisk, though she wasn't sure he even heard her. The question was lighthearted but she quickly realized that it wasn't for him; not at all.

"I did what you asked."

Confusion set in quickly and she just stared at him, though he quickly responded.

"I let three warriors die in an excruciating way, just to save your kits. I had to make that call, and now I'm having to deal with the repercussions. But hey, now we can relate to each other because the whole clan hates both of us."

Dawnstar just looked at him, the apathy in her gaze turning into something a little more sympathetic, however soon she was consumed with determination. She wanted to send a message to her clan, and she knew exactly how she was going to do it.

It started with a quick message to Leopardlune but soon she was calling a clan meeting, feeling an almost new sense of enlightenment as she watched her clan gather beneath her.

"I feel as though we are entering into a new era, and I feel very good about it. For so long I think we can a agree we've been lead by

fear, but now I have hope, and hope is the only thing stronger than fear."

Her clan remained silent. They didn't cheer. They didn't nod their heads in approval. They just stared with emotionless eyes.

Dawnstar didn't allow it to taint her, so the white molly kept her chin tipped and her ears perked. If she appeared strong, she'd be treated as though she was.

"However a sappy message isn't the reason I've called this meeting. I believe there are two kits who have been long overdue of their apprentice ceremony. Cranekit and Stonekit, please step forward."

She watched as they stumbled forward, their excitement clear in their quick movements.

"Stonekit, you have reached the age of six moons, and it is time for you to be apprenticed. From this day on, until you receive your warrior name, you will be known as Stonepaw. Your mentor will be Fernflicker and I have faith that she will train you to be a remarkable warrior one day."

She watched as the young warrior's face instantly brightened and the two touched noses before returning back to the crowd before she continued.

"Cranekit, you have reached the age of six moons, and it is time for you to be apprenticed. From this day on, until you receive your warrior name, you will be known as Cranepaw. Your mentor will be Lionglare, and *I know* that he will turn you into one of FallClan's most promising warriors."

She watched Cranepaw beam with excitement and Dawnstar was filled with her own satisfaction as Lionglare's eyes widened in shock, though before the two could even touch noses, the uproar began.

"Have you officially lost it?" Goldenfell hissed, his teeth seething. His anger only built upon her own growing rage. "He killed three warriors to save kits who offer nothing to the clan!"

"He's a murderer, and you're *rewarding* him!" Lakelily sneered, malice so vivid within his tone and hatred so clear within his gaze.

"That fire killed my mother," Fernflicker spoke up, her excitement now faded and a more serious look consuming her, "Lionglare could've saved her, instead he let her die along with two very important cats within our clan."

"I say exile him! He's a coward, a puppet to Dawnstar's every demand!" Lakelily snarled and Dawnstar instantly looked to Lionglare, her heart breaking as she watched his head hang low, his eyes nothing but hurt.

"It is not black and white!" Dawnstar snarled in return, settling with Lakelily's furious gaze. "There is no right or wrong answer to this, and your pleas for exile are vile and cruel."

"Oh please, spare me your hypocrisy." Lakelily retorted.

"I agree that exile is too far of a punishment, but to grant him the role of mentor out of all the other options seems like a reward which he has not earned. Black or white, I don't care. Three warriors died and maybe not directly, but they died by his paws." Shadeheart spoke up, the others murmuring agreement.

"But four lives were saved," Leopardlune spoke up this time and Dawnstar offered her a grateful glance, "my brother may be the best cat I've ever met, and he was placed in an extremely difficult situation that not many could've handled. He *risked his life* to save those kits, when most of you would've saved your own tail and left."

"He saved those kits over warriors who deserved it more! Not just that, Sagefrost is one of the deceased and he was an *elder* who spent his entire life devoting it to FallClan, just to be left for dead over a few kits who were what, not even half a moon old?" Frostbird spoke and Leopardlune seemed like she was about to pounce, however she ignored the molly's words of defamation as she looked to Goldenfell.

"Dad, you can't really mean what you say." Leopardlune pleaded, and Dawnstar watched with curiosity.

"Meadowlark was my sister, and now she's dead." Goldenfell hissed, his ears pinned uncomfortably low.

"*But I'm your son!"* Lionglare finally spoke, his words so delicate they seemed as though they would break. Dawnstar thought he was about to cry.

"And right now, I can't even look at you." Goldenfell muttered and Dawnstar watched the look on Lionglare's face grew into something so painfully broken.

"I'm offering to take on Cranepaw's training. I think we can all agree that Lionglare doesn't deserve to be her mentor, and I'll do a much better job at it anyways." Redgrowl spoke up.

"*No."* Dawnstar snarled, her words holding an entirely new dominance she didn't typically adorn. "Lionglare will remain as her mentor, and in fact, I have a whole new proposition."

It was a sudden idea, one that immediately infected her mind. Truth be told, it was her way of being defiant. She wanted to prove a point, and she couldn't think of any better way of doing it.

"There has been something I've been holding off because for so long, I didn't think any of you were worthy of it. But now, it's so incredibly clear who deserves this, and I have full faith in my decision and it eases me knowing that *none of you* will be able to change it, so you can complain all you want. I'll enjoy every second of it knowing you'll all just be wasting your breath." Dawnstar let the words fall with ease, supported by her high of the moment and her thrill from rebellion.

"I say these words before StarClan, so that the spirits of our warrior ancestors may hear and approve of my choice. The new deputy of FallClan is Lionglare."

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Her clan's fury with her was nearly satisfying— the look of dread which crossed their faces when she named Lionglare as her deputy, the pride which shone so emotively within Leopardlune's eyes, the
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shock on her deputy's face— it was thrilling.

However now Dawnstar had a whole new proposal; one for Viperstar. For once, the waters seemed to spread in her favor and it was metaphorically illuminating.

Dawnstar didn't have to fake her confidence, either. It was natural. As she padded towards his den and he allowed her in without a single doubt, her conviction only spread.

Dawnstar was met by Viperstar, his amber eyes welcoming as he offered her a mouse, which she politely declined.

Clearmist was there as well, WinterClan's deputy and oddly enough, Viperstar's mate. It was more of a silent rule that it was frowned upon to appoint mates as deputies, but she had much bigger problems.

"I'm not saying that I'm glad the fire happened. It was a tragedy, one that will haunt my clan for many moons. The lives taken will forever be remembered and embraced, however before this occurred, I have been meaning to inform you all of a very dire matter."

Viperstar and Clearmist shared a curious look before they allowed their gazes to fall back on her, both heads tilting as if they were synced.

"For many moons, we have been in a very tiring and brutal scuffle with SpringClan as they continue to forcibly take our territory. We've lost many lives to this ongoing violence, and just recently we were attacked by not only them, but SummerClan as well. I've been informed that they have banded together in attempt to overthrow all of us and steal what is rightfully ours, and I fear that WinterClan may be the next victim of their vicious attacks." It was lies, small lies, but small lies with big impact. Truth be told, this war did not involve WinterClan at all, but *she needed* their help, and this was the only way she was positive she would get it.

Viperstar's expression quickly shifted into something much more concerned, the warmth within his amber eyes replaced with a

chilling apprehension.

"I always feared Ivystar's ambition would get the best of her, however I must say I am shocked to hear this is also coming from Fallowstar." Clearmist spoke, her words soft and delicate; pretty even.

"I was just as surprised as you are when I found this out, however we were not warned. We had to learn the hard way. Your generosity has been so appreciated and you deserve to be informed of the dangers which are lurking, and you deserve the warning we were not graced with having." Dawnstar explained.

Viperstar looked to his mate for a brief moment, both their eyes full of warmth even through the dire news just delivered to them, however when he looked back to Dawnstar, his eyes shone with something much more reluctant.

"Our history has been kept sacred to the warriors whom inhabited our lands long ago and if we break our connection, our clans' spiritual hold with the world will completely fail and we will no longer prosper during our respective season. This has always been our way, why would they throw it all on the line?" Viperstar queried.

"Ambition is a powerful navigator, and sometimes we get lost during the navigation. Glory is power and sometimes, power is downfall." Dawnstar spoke, almost too quickly for her own liking, however her words seemed to finally settle within the ears of the beholder.

Clearmist still seemed unsure, doubt clouding her rounded doe eyes, however Viperstar seemed as though he was more concerned than unconvinced and Dawnstar felt a weight lift from her shoulders when the WinterClan leader finally spoke.

"Ivystar's playing a very dirty game and if she wants to tag team, then two can certainly play at that. I must say," Viperstar paused almost poetically, "I'm not much for losing."

Though she was nearly buzzing with satisfaction, Dawnstar was

able to contain an emotionless expression, though her newfound confidence didn't waver.

"I don't plan on losing."

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fun little question!!
who is your favorite "side" character?

chapter 33

It was a solicited agreement; an alliance. Though it took a bit of convincing, Dawnstar had finally managed to get Viperstar on her side. Truth be told, the tomcat was too gullible for his own good.

FallClan was still residing within the confinement of WinterClan, however the divide between the clans was faltering as they began to work together. With the announcement of the coalition, her clan was much more eased and even elated to begin conversing with their newfound union.

So much defeat had clouded over them, the rebirth of hope was enough to set focus off of her, and Lionglare as well.

Early morning birdsong hummed in her ears as Dawnstar trekked through the terrain of WinterClan, the everyday sights becoming so familiar to her.

One moment of peace before the real action strikes, and the intensity of it all was liberating.

"Dawnstar."

Words so familiar yet so angry entered her ears. Dawnstar's blue depth was met by many different faces, all too familiar and all too accusing.

Brinebloom was to one to say her name so irately, his own blue eyes a deeper depth of incandescence than he normally adorned. However it was the parade behind him that nerved her the most.

Blossomfall, Nightglow and Leopardlune stood behind him, each one just as difficult to read as the next.

"What is this about?" Dawnstar queried, her gaze instantly meeting with Leopardlune's however her friend's own eyes were oddly resentful.

"Clear your name while you can, Dawnstar. Don't make me say it *again."* Nightglow spoke up, and the leader felt dread crawl up her chest and run through every inch of her being.

"I'm not sure what you me-"

"*Don't lie."* Blossomfall snarled, the venom in her voice seeming to inflict a certain toxicity. "You've done that enough. For once in your dreadful life, just tell the truth."

"I can't believe I defended you for so long." Leopardlune nearly whispered, though her words weren't vile, however much more pained. She seemed so betrayed.

"Brinebloom, what's going on?" Dawnstar questioned, a nearly anguished desperation taking over her voice as she frantically looked at her brother for answers.

"We know *everything* Dawnstar."

Heartbreak may be metaphorical; your heart doesn't *literally* break. However Dawnstar could *feel* her heart shattering, piece by piece, as an uncomfortable heat took over her entire body.

"I found out that I'm having kits." Blossomfall stated bluntly and Dawnstar just stared at her, clearly dumbfounded.

"What does this have-"

"*My kits*." Nightglow answered for her, his ears pinned uncomfortably low and his teeth noticeably bared.

"When I told Nightglow the news, he broke down into sobs. He told me *everything*." Blossomfall spoke, and the leader swore she could see a smile lining her face.

"He told us about Luca, the kits' real father. He also told us how you blackmailed him into being the father. You caused so much divide. So much hurt. Do you know that?" Leopardlune hissed, though her words were breaking and her eyes were brimming with tears.

"*Leo."* Dawnstar breathed out, and her friend just shook her head, an

almost silent disregard for her childhood nickname.

"He also mentioned this wasn't your first time lying, so please, enlighten me. What other insipid lies have left your mouth?" Blossomfall sneered.

"I have a few theories." Brinebloom muttered.

Think fast, Dawnstar. You have to think fast.

"Harmless threats; they were harmless! I was scared, okay, I was scared I would be outcasted from the cats I love most if I revealed the truth. It was wrong, I'm aware, I promise I am," Dawnstar paused slowly, eyes darting from each unconvinced glare before continuing, "I only told Nightglow that I'd tell you about the kits myself, Bloss. This is not as bad as it looks, you're all just being dramatic." She explained, trying to quickly shift it onto them. She wanted them to question themselves, it was the only way she could gain power in this situation.

"*Dramatic?"* Nightglow and Blossomfall both hissed in unison.

"Yes. *Dramatic*. You all feed into petty affairs when we have much more important matters at stake!" Dawnstar reasoned back, feeling her panic fade into satisfaction. She just needed them to doubt their judgement and she'd be in the clear.

"This war does not mean your actions go without consequences." Brinebloom retorted back and she just stared at her brother with callous cerulean eyes.

"Brother, please. Who's going to punish me?" She questioned, waiting a moment for an answer that never came from the assembled felines before she smiled victoriously. "That's right, no one, for I am *the leader.* No one is above me so therefore, who am I to pay the repercussions to?"

The other four felines just looked at her with disgust, however silence followed. Whatever their quarrel was, she had ended it, and it was a feeling of pure ecstasy.

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"Mom! Mom! You came to see us!" A delicate, shrilly voice beamed. Maplekit nearly tripped Dawnstar as she made her way to where her kits stayed.

"It's been days, mom. You haven't seen us for days." Stormkit spoke, his tone broody and eyes accusing. As Dawnstar tried to give him an apologetic nudge, he quickly dodged it.

"Yeah! Leopardlune has still been caring for us and she isn't even a queen anymore." Ivorykit argued and Stormkit nodded in agreement to his sister.

"Mom is the leader, she is the strongest cat in the clan and she has to watch over it all! Right, mama?" Maplekit grinned, the only of her four kits completely glued to her mother's side.

"Something like that." Dawnstar murmured softly, though she finally realized how much she was actually spending away from them. Truth be told, they still felt like strangers to her.

"Not an excuse." Stormkit hissed under his breath, though she heard his words loudly and clearly.

"What about dad? Dad never comes around anymore, and he told me we'd play mossball, like, a hundred moons ago." Ivorykit queried and the FallClan leader felt her entire body tense. *Was she going to have to tell her kits that their father wasn't really their father?*

"Dad doesn't care about us, just like mom." Stormkit grumbled and this struck an instant reaction from Maplekit, who was no longer by Dawnstar's side.

"I care about you so much. I do." Dawnstar instantly replied, her words much more genuine than she expected. These were her kits, and whatever confusion she felt around them, that meant something to her.

She loved them. At least, she thought she did. What kind of terrible mother doesn't love her kits?

Stormkit continued to stare at her with the same discontent. He was severely apathetic, she gathered, from the very few visits she spent

with her kits.

Ivorykit, she wasn't so sure. Her little twin seemed so superficial, but maybe it was because she hadn't spent enough time to truly know and understand her.

Maplekit was her eldest and definitely held the energy the others lacked. She was bossy, Dawnstar had noticed early on, but her daughter's eyes seemed to constantly beam with a feverish light. She seemed to be the most clingy of her mother as well; Dawnstar secretly favored her.

Her youngest was a bit of a worry. Dawnstar noticed Lunekit seemed very distant from her and if she didn't know any better, she'd think he resented her. He seemed to be distant from his siblings as well; all but Maplekit. He clung to his sister dearly, though Dawnstar understood why. Her eldest was much more nurturing to him than she ever was.

It was pathetic really. Dawnstar was given one more chance to do something right and yet she completely screwed it up.

Again.

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Of all her borders, she preferred WinterClan's terrain the most. It reminded her of home.

Dawnstar's cerulean gaze took in the pines as they blurred past her, her paws crunching in the dried leaves beneath her. She tried to drown out the accusations thrown her way the previous morning though they were true.

Winning this war was all that mattered to her and it was heavily clouding her judgment.

Dawnstar let herself fall into a steady halt as she reached into a dip of the rocky terrain where the rocks gave way into a deep fall. Below was crashing waves, the sound of gurgling water splashing against stone nearly soothing as the sulfuric smell stung her nose.
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"It's pretty, isn't it?"

Dawnstar froze, ears pinning as she turned to meet dim copper eyes. She was quiet for a moment, however she didn't feel threatened by the new presence.

"Reminds me of home." She spoke curtly, her eyes not wavering once from the copper gaze staring back at her.

"After all that place has done to us, it doesn't really feel like home, does it?" Nightglow questioned, the edge of his tone erupting a cryptic curiosity within her, though he spoke again before she could.

"But I guess I can't really blame the *place,* per say. I think the blame falls onto *someone,* instead of something."

"What are you hinting at Nightglow? Instead of saying your pretty little words that are supposed to mean anything, just get to the point." Dawnstar demanded.

Nightglow didn't waste a second, as if the words falling from his mouth had been recited over and over, the pitch and tone nearly perfect in every way and the emotion— the anger— in his voice was crystal clear.

"Blossomfall has lost everything! She lost her sister— your mate— to the paws of her own brother, who also died. Yet, no one cared because he was a murderer. They were glad he was gone, and she had to deal with that grief alone." Nightglow sneered, the indirect mention of Doveflutter making Dawnstar's stomach tighten uncomfortably before he continued speaking.

"You made me tell her that your kits were mine, made me break her already fragile heart just to ensure she was safe; from you," Nightglow paused as his face grew even with her's, "do you not understand how twisted that is? We used to be friends. *She used to be your friend*. Does that mean *anything* to you?"

Dawnstar didn't respond. Instead she just stared, her gaze unreadable. She wasn't sure what to say. The cat before her was

someone she grew up with. It was someone she cared about. It was someone she hurt.

"It used to." Dawnstar spoke quietly. "But right now, my personal relationships aren't important. When this war is over, I'll be better? Okay? I'll be the mother my kits deserve, I'll be the sister Brinebloom needs, I'll be the friend Leopardlune wants back and I'll be the leader you all earned. I'll change, I will, and I'll make it all right again. *I just need to get through this war, okay? Can you understand that?"*

"No, I can't." Nightglow snarled, his tail lashing.
"I'm done being scared of you, and I'm done letting you control my life. There is one way I can solve all our problems, and I'm willing to give up my own life to ensure my kits get to live safely with their mother. However the only way that can happen is if you were *eliminated."*

"Is that a threat?" Dawnstar questioned, a malicious melody nearly lining her throat.

"Not a threat. A promise." Nightglow corrected. The two held a long stare, something nearly psychedelic covering them in a haze. Whatever had finally clicked for him, Nightglow was not the same cat.

He was damaged.

She damaged him.

And now, she would kill him.

It seemed like routine at this point, the flash in his eyes before he sprung for an attack. She called it instantly; she always knew when they were gonna make the attack before they even knew themselves.

She dodged it.

He struck again. She dodged again.

His growing frustration was clear, and she took his momentary

moment of weakness as her key to attack, her claws instantly locking into his shoulders, claws digging in then ripping forward.

Her father taught her that move.

His screech was almost completely drowned out and her senses seemed weakened. She felt weightless.

Dawnstar sent another attack, her claw swatting him across the face as his body skidded against the rocky terrain. The leader then slowly trekked towards the rocky drop into the merciless waves below before her blue gaze darted back to Nightglow. If she could just get him off the cliff, the immediate second he hit the water it would feel as though hitting rocks by the immense height and terminal velocity.

It'd break every bone in his body, and that's only part of it.

He'd die instantly.

Dawnstar glanced down once more, the murky water a deep cerulean depth, foamy and eerie. Even if he managed to survive the fall— which he wouldn't— he'd never get out of the lethal current.

She didn't have to think about it hard. It was an easy option; one where her name would be cleared. *Nightglow just fell to his death, I had no part in it.*

There'd be nothing to paint her as the culprit.

However a single flaw; she didn't think fast enough. During her mental planning, Nightglow seemed to have his own scheme.

Now she was free falling, her screams echoing against the rocks as she squeezed her eyes shut. *He just had to be a martyr.*

For a brief moment, her eyes opened and instantly fell with his copper gaze, though his anger was gone. Now his gaze was full of acceptance.

She wasn't really sure what happened after that. She must've hit the water's surface because she was fully knocked unconscious.

However when she awoke, her coat was nearly transparent. She could literally see through her paws. *No, this is impossible. I have more lives.*

"You do." Sunstar spoke and she instantly looked at him. Did he read her thoughts?

"The fall left your physical body completely disfigured, so we had to prepare it more thoroughly before we sent you back. You're residing within your spiritual body as of now, only until we fix you." He explained, however Dawnstar was only trying to read him. Surely he had many things he wanted to say to her.

But he remained quiet.

"Is Nightglow dead?" She questioned, trying to find anything in her former leader's gaze. Still, he showed not a single emotion.

"Yes."

More silence.

"Sunstar, just say what you need to say. Get it ove-"

Her vision went black and it was almost as if she could feel herself recharging, like she was gaining her lives all over again.

Suddenly the white she-cat was underwater, something dragging her down with it. Whenever she was able to swim up for air, she was dragged back under again. She could feel it swelling her throat, clogging her nose and muffling all the sounds around her. Her body continuously fell back into an instinctual panic mode, however she flickered back into StarClan, almost like a glitch— a blink— before she was drowning again. It happened multiple times and she wasn't sure what was happening. Was this Sunstar punishing her? Letting her die over and over until she was drained of every life?

She was under the water once more, and although she could feel the waves growing less rash, she was devoid of any energy to pull herself to the surface. So instead she let herself sink. *Was this it? Was this really how she was going to die?*

She wasn't ready. She always thought she'd be ready but she wasn't.

However Dawnstar's thoughts paused as teeth bared down on her scruff and suddenly, she was being dragged up. Finally she met the surface and Dawnstar felt her body nearly convulse as she heaved for air, her breaths messy and forced as she was dragged to shore, the water still lightly lapping at her paws.

"Are you okay?"

Dawnstar flicked an ear before finally gaining the strength to open her eyes, blue meeting a nearly golden gaze as Lionglare looked down at her, his fur plastered to his lean frame.

"I will be." She spoke weakly as she slowly got to her paws, instantly looking back at him with a sudden urgency. "How did you find me?"

"I was just walking across the bank and then I saw you. How did you even get yourself into this situation?"

"Guess I wasn't paying attention." She quickly replied before she began walking, motioning for him to follow. "Don't mention anything to the clan, okay?"

Lionglare just nodded, his eyes clouded with granted confusion. As they walked home, Dawnstar went over her words with Nightglow.

She wasn't lying. Once this war was over, she'd make amends. She'd redeem herself. At the end of the day, everything she did, she did to protect her clan and lead them to victory.

That made it all okay, right?

No, it didn't. Deep down, she knew that.

But she also knew that they had to win this war, or everything she did, it would've all been for nothing.

That would be the worst defeat of all.

Hey guys! There's about four/three more chapters and I cannot wait for you to see how it all ends, and I hope I'm able to bring it full circle like I have planned.

Also let's talk about what a *wonderful* mother Dawnstar is! But in all honesty, these kits are going to suffer some major physiological issues from the emotional neglect from their mother.

chapter 34

High achiever, don't you see?
Baby, nothing comes for free
They say I'm a control freak
Driven by a greed to succeed
Nobody can stop me

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The excitement which radiated off her clan due to their new alliance quickly disintegrated when FallClan returned to their home completely destroyed. No leaves remained on the ashen branches, and it wasn't because of the approaching leaf-fall, but because of the malicious flames which spared their home no mercy. Charred remnants covered their territory and soot stuck to their paws as they sauntered home.

The burning sensation still stung Dawnstar's nose as she slept in her den that night, still luckily in tact. In fact, most of camp had been fortunately spared other than the medicine cat's den, but Graypetal didn't waver in collecting herbs with the newly-named Hiddenleaf. Sandsong and Fablepaw were eager to help, as well. In fact Viperstar had agreed to send a band of his own warriors to help with the damage, though Dawnstar still felt herself grow wary over his motives.

Worst of all, Dawnstar was sick.

Literally.

As soon as she returned home, she was throwing up everywhere. Her pupils were constricted and she had never felt so lethargic in her life. Sandsong had given her a few herbs from her own stash but none of it was working, in fact she felt as though she was getting worse every second.

Because Graypetal wasn't sure her sickness was contagious, he had

her quarantined in her den. With Blossomfall just recently moving into the nursery, the sable she-cat was forced to watch over Dawnstar's kits. *I bet she loves that.*

"How are you feeling?" The gray medicine cat spoke quietly, her dim gaze meeting his.

"*Horrible."*

"You look horrible." Graypetal duly noted in return as Dawnstar scoffed, however he wasn't wrong. She had lost a bit of weight and she hadn't cared to brush her fur in days.

"Thanks." She grumbled. "I feel hot, like annoyingly hot, I can barely breathe through my nose and my throat is scratchy. Can you like, get me something for that?"

"I'll see what I can do." Graypetal sighed before he left.

As she was left alone in silence, Dawnstar felt her head begin to pound. A pitching ring was screaming in her ears but she seemed to be the only one who could hear it. *Is this the world punishing me?* Dawnstar groaned at the thought.

Somehow along the way she had fallen asleep.

However she wished she could wake back up.

Though asleep, her mind was still active and everything around her felt thinner. Dawnstar's eyes opened to an eerie forest, one that struck instant deja vu from previous dreams she had. As she began to pad forward, she felt her energy levels increase. She didn't feel sick anymore.

As a kit, this place would've terrified her. The tall, branchless trees which loomed into a completely black sky. The black and white flowers which lined the ragged path she followed. The faded, inaudible whispers she heard so quietly lull in her ear.

As she walked forward, she felt the air grow thicker. Gravity seemed to weigh her down more than before and every stride she took felt forced.

However she paused as red eyes stared directly at her, unwavering and cold. She had seen them before in a previous dream, though it was moons ago.

However as Dawnstar continued forward, the whispers grew louder and more angrier. They seemed as though they were chanting something, however she wasn't sure what. *Transfer maybe? Transfer to something abominate?* She wasn't sure, the words were so quiet but whatever she thought she heard didn't make any sense.

However Dawnstar paused as doves began swarming her head in a murmuration, blinding her in a haze of panicked feathers. It was as if the magnetic field was collapsing, the birds unsure of where to go so they cluttered in delirious swarms and dropped dead from the sky.

After a few seconds it was over and Dawnstar was surrounded in a pile of dead doves, however as she stepped away from the corpses, her heart instantly dropped as she noticed something she hadn't seen in moons.

The dead birds had fallen into a perfect x symbol, the same symbol which was carved into every murder which previously haunted her clan.

However as she backed away from the scene, her paws hit something stiff and she felt blood seep beneath her paw pads. As she turned around, Dawnstar was met with a completely shredded swan, chest ripped open and eyes gauged out.

However what frightened her the most was the beating heart which pulsed within the dead swan's chest, a complete irony as one's heart doesn't beat after death.

Soon the sight was gone. The forest faded. The thick air allowed her to breathe once more.

Dawnstar was in StarClan.

Sunstar was ahead of her, golden gaze ablaze and threatening. The FallClan leader fixed her posture, quickly composing herself from

the sights she had just witnessed as she narrowed her own gaze at the callous eyes shooting her daggers.

"What was the point of that montage, Sunstar? Was it supposed to frighten me?" She snarled.

"No, Dawnstar. That montage was a vision, however not one from StarClan. A darkness has infected your mind, the same darkness which possessed Tealpool, however I feel it's grasp is much more prevalent on you."

"Tealpool was a murderer who went delirious and found really crafty ways to kill without motive. We are not the same."

"No, you're not. A very clear line separates you both; Tealpool was taken advantage of, his mind becoming a home to something vile which took host within his soul. However you, Dawnstar, are very much in control of your own mind and soul."

The she-cat went silent, blue eyes not wavering once from his deep golden depth.

"What do you want from me?" She finally hissed and Sunstar only tipped his chin, as if he had been waiting for her to ask that question all along.

"The sickness you caught was such an inconvenience, so bad that it has taken yet another of your lives. You really should be more careful Dawnstar." Sunstar spoke and she felt her frustration grow with every word he spoke.

"You ask what I want? I'll tell you," he paused, almost lyrically, "I want you to step down as leader, Dawnstar. You have proven incompetent and you continue to lead your clan down a spiral of violence."

She wasn't sure what she was expecting, but it wasn't that. Dawnstar just stared at him, someone who had once been her better, and all she could do was laugh.

"*No.*"

It was liberating. He has no control over her. She had bettered her better.

"If you want what is best for everyone you will get your tail out of your—"

"Sunstar, I'm sorry you were *too weak* to lead our clan to victory, but I'm done making those same mistakes. With WinterClan on my side, I will finish this war and I will finish it victoriously. I will not be stepping down, and there's *nothing* you can do about it."

"Has anyone ever told you ignorance is bliss?" Sunstar spoke, though his words were much more brutal and clearly more personal.

"Send me back, Sunstar." She ignored his words.

"You don't worry about what you don't know, that's what it means. You're sending your clan into a tunnel with no idea where it ends."

"Send me back, Sunstar." She repeated herself.

"You're so wrapped up in winning this war that you've grown oblivious to the very darkness which killed your mother! The same darkness that left your mate completely disfigured!"

"I said send me back!" She snarled, her claws now unsheathed and her nostrils flared as her chest heaved.

Sunstar went silent and they stared at each other. For so long, they just stared, eyes burning with so many different emotions that Dawnstar couldn't pinpoint a single one.

The silence was loud.

"Very well."

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"Happy resurrection day."

Dawnstar flicked an ear as the words crept into her ears, her eyes
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adjusting to the light as she focused on the cat inside her den.

"What are you doing here?" The white molly sneered as she slowly sat up, the sickness not as violent as before but she still felt fairly weak.

"Just wanted to check in on you." Blossomfall responded all too innocently as she fluttered her eyes, sable tail wrapping around her petite paws.

"How are my kits?"

"They're fine, I suppose. You know I used to hate the little things when I actually believed them to be Nightglow's kits." Blossomfall began, though Dawnstar didn't miss the way the ebony molly winced as she brought up the dead tomcat. "Now I just pity them— an absent mother, no father, no sense of security— it's really showed me the mother I strive *not to be."*

"You have a lot of nerve coming up here and critiquing *my parenting style."* Dawnstar sneered.

"Just observing, not criticizing."

"Oh please, as if you aren't the most critical cat known to Earth."

"I suppose." Blossomfall replied, however her words were longer and more drawn out, as if she was singing them. There was something so calmly terrifying about the she-cat, and it scared Dawnstar more than she'd like to admit.

"Listen Dawnstar," Blossomfall paused as her face grew even with her leader's, "you've been a little careless lately, so careless that you've lost eight of your nine lives."

"*Are you threatening me?"* Dawnstar hissed as she stood to her paws, ignoring the way her eyes grew dizzy because she still felt lightheaded.

"No, just reminding you." Blossomfall responded, her tone much more controlled than Dawnstar's. "However, if it needs to be a threat, *it very well can be."*

"You listen here," Dawnstar hissed through gritted teeth, "I don't know what gave you the sudden audacity to throw around threats, and I hope for your own sake you listen to my very words, but when this war is over, I will kill *anybody* who is conspiring against me," Dawnstar paused, her eyes burning so vividly with her rival, "*and I'll start with you."*

They held each other in an incandescent stare, both with rounding pupils and scathing claws.

"What's going on here?" Hiddenleaf bursted, snapping the two out of their trance. Blossomfall just mumbled a quick "nothing" and walked away, leaving Dawnstar to wallow in the aftermath.

"I brought you some feverfew, it should help with your lingering side effects. Sandsong brought it over from WinterClan." Hiddenleaf spoke.

Dawnstar didn't respond though she ate the herbs with ease.

"Do you need anything else?"

"Yes, actually." Dawnstar spoke, a sudden confidence overcoming her voice as she stared at the medicine cat. Hiddenleaf just stared at her, obviously confused though she remained quiet to let Dawnstar speak.

"I was once a medicine cat apprentice," Dawnstar began as she watched her claw twirl a piece of her nest, "and though my memory is a little jagged, I do remember Graypetal warning me about the berries that are south of Needle Point."

"Yes, that's where most of the deathberries are grown at." Hiddenleaf responded, the hesitance in her voice revealing her growing discomfort.

"You see Hiddenleaf, I've been threatened and I need this threat to be," Dawnstar paused as she snapped a piece of her nest in half, *"eliminated."*

"No! No I won't do it!" Hiddenleaf wailed as she backed up, horror swirling within her eyes.

"Oh calm down." Dawnstar snapped, eyes rolling involuntarily through her growing frustration. "No one would ever think it was you, just make it look like a suicide."

"I won't do it!"

"Yes, you will, because if you don't, I'll make sure to add Fernflicker to my kill list." At this point, threats were Dawnstar's second nature. It had been such a common occurrence for her, she was beginning to grow blind to how bad it really was. She had nothing against Hiddenleaf's sister, but if another threat was all it took to get the medicine cat to cooperate, so be it.

"You wouldn't."

"Oh but I did." Dawnstar spoke, almost carelessly, as she flicked the broken piece of her nest away before she settled her gaze with Hiddenleaf again.

Hiddenleaf was quiet and Dawnstar could see the mental struggle she was having beneath her doe eyes, however when the little medicine cat finally sighed in reluctance, Dawnstar knew she had won.

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"I didn't know how much lower you could go, but I suppose you're just full of surprises! What goes on inside your head? Please, enlighten me. *I need to understand why you're so screwed up."* Brinebloom vented, jumbling his words however the anger which burned beneath typically apathetic eyes was enough to tell Dawnstar he was a little mad.

Maybe not a little mad.

More like extremely mad.

Hiddenleaf had ratted her out to her brother, though Dawnstar had to hand it to her, the little medicine cat had her convinced.

"Blossomfall threatened me, do not pin this all on me. She had it coming." Dawnstar snarled in return, tail lashing wickedly.
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"So you thought blackmailing the medicine cat with *killing her sister* was the solution? Have you officially gone mad?" Brinebloom hissed.

Dawnstar was quiet for a moment, a little realization clicking in her mind, one she didn't want to accept.

"Maybe." She sighed, however her sudden shift in attitude didn't garner any sympathy from her enraged brother.

"You know, I see you, and I see the way you hold up this facade as if you're all tough and untouchable. But you fail to realize that I'm your brother, *I know you more than you know."*

*"*No, you don't. You have no idea the trials it takes to lead a clan through one of the most bloodiest wars in our history."

"Maybe not." Brinebloom spoke, his words much more quieter than the screams he was originally spurting. "But I try to, however it's hard when you never allow any kind of vulnerability."

"That's the last thing Doveflutter told me before she died, you know." Dawnstar muttered, her tail curling defensively around her paws.

Brinebloom went quiet at that, though she could still feel his deep cerulean gaze boring into her, though she only allowed her eyes to stare at her paws.

"Dawnstar, you can't kill everybody you don't trust." He finally said, his words oddly calm despite the message they carried. She finally met his gaze, the anger gone, and replaced with something she nearly took as warmth.

She and her brother had a complex relationship to say the least. At the end of the day, blood was thicker than water. Maybe that counted for something.

Maybe she could give in. Maybe she could allow her brother just a bit of vulnerability. Maybe she could just get through this war, trust issues and her desperate need for control pushed to the side.

She was ready to allow his comfort.

She was so close.

And yet, to no avail.

"*Watch me."*

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It was the dead of night, which was what surprised Dawnstar the most when she was met by a smaller version of herself. Apparently Ivorykit couldn't sleep because Maplekit was a "loud snorer" and took over the whole nest.

So Dawnstar decided to bring her daughter on a walk, her first time being with one of her kits one-on-one.

At first, it was tense and noticeably awkward. Dawnstar wasn't sure what to say, and Ivorykit seemed to be just as anxious.

It was frustrating beyond words. How had Swanflutter been so perfect at everything Dawnstar seemed to struggle with? It was as if her mother was handcrafted by the stars above, gifted with every admirable trait.

As the silence continued to engulf the two in a heavy weight, Dawnstar began going over everything her mother had told her and the many different ways she brought symbols and their meanings into play.

Though one memory stuck vividly in her mind, one that brought Dawnstar a wave of elation as she looked at the sky.

"When I was just a little older than you, my mom told me that the crescent moon was originated from the word 'ceres' which meant to bring fourth, in a sense." She started, her words shaky. She wanted to perfect this, for once in her life she wanted to do something right.

"Bring fourth?" Ivorykit's squeaky little voice beamed, the edges of her words brisk, as if they were being swallowed by the void of
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silence which was slowly disintegrating.

"It means growth. The moon goes through many different stages, as do we. It's a beacon of hope, a promise for new opportunities." Dawnstar spoke, offering her daughter a small smile. "My mother was always intuitive, she said her energy was fueled by the moon's wisdom."

"Do you believe that?" Ivorykit queried, curiosity shining so feverishly within her crystalline gaze.

"I don't know," Dawnstar admitted as she sighed slowly, "but I do know that she was very wise. Very intuitive. She mentioned something about birth and death, a certain transcendence to the next spiritual plane."

"Like StarClan?"

"I suppose," Dawnstar paused, "but I think she meant something else, something deeper than you and me will probably ever understand."

Ivorykit was quiet at this, the confusion within her gaze nearly nostalgic for Dawnstar. She remembered being around her daughter's age and being so confused by her mother's words, yet eager to learn more.

She missed her.

"She seems like a really amazing cat," Ivorykit murmured, "I wish I had got to meet her."

"You and me both." Dawnstar replied, her words filled with a comforting solace. As the two paused by a small drop, the FallClan leader felt her body tense as Ivorykit's little body rested against her mother's side, a gentle purr rumbling within her daughter's throat.

For once, this kit didn't feel like a stranger to her and a fire of warmth erupted within the pits of her stomach, an emotion she had been yearning for so long.

The intensity of a mother's love.

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Only two more chapters now, and the next chapter is the one I've been looking forward to the most since the beginning of this book! A lot of questions are going to be answered and plot lines I'm sure some of you think I abandoned are going to be reopened.

Also, Are You Satisfied by MARINA describes Dawnstar completely so I had to use it as this chapter's opener. ^^

chapter 35

Oh, beautiful poison tree
Let your power grow in me
Let your sorrow pour in me
Take away my blood and bones
Make your flowers deep inside of me

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Snowfall had came early this year, setting the lands in a picturesque blanket, leaving the trees bare and daunting. Almost symbolically, WinterClan had taken home within FallClan to prepare for the deadliest war known to the clans.

Though it was an alliance, Dawnstar was aware of her superiority over everyone, even Viperstar. They all looked to her. They knew she would lead them to victory.

It was strange, almost.

As if it was *too good* to be true. Her own clan had never had faith in her, so why did they now?

As Dawnstar closed her eyes and allowed for sleep to greet her, she felt a tug within the very core of her being, as if something was pulling her with an immense force. It was a power she had never felt before, not even by the paws of StarClan.

Her eyes opened to something she wished to be perpetual.

A beautiful clearing with an open meadow, delicate monarchs fluttering above her head as the sun began to rise from the distant horizon, coloring the sky in a collection of light, dreamlike colors.

It was beautiful, and with the sight came a rush of warmth, embracing her in a feeling she hadn't felt in many moons.

"*Mom."* Dawnstar lulled, the emotion tucked in her voice coating the

very edges, a type of emotional vulnerability she had been sheltering for so long.

Swanflutter slowly padded towards her daughter from the meadow, the sunlight making her gray fur shine a near silver, her laurel green eyes full of the compassion Dawnstar had missed so much.

Dawnstar was starstruck, her heart beating so incredibly fast. She kept reminding herself that this was a dream, but yet it felt like more than that, as if she was in a preternatural state that she'd never fully understand.

Something otherworldly.

However Dawnstar felt the ground beneath her shake, sending vibrations all throughout her body. Suddenly the alluring sky above her bled into something much more sinister, shifting into a black void that appeared everlasting.

Suddenly the monarchs were dead, sitting by Dawnstar's dainty paws, their little wings twitching for a brief second until they were completely still.

Dawnstar looked at them in horror before she glanced up once more, expecting to look up and see Swanflutter gone, however her mother was still there.

Though something about her was different.

So terrifyingly different.

"Mom," Dawnstar started with a formidable hesitance, "what is this place?"

Swanflutter didn't respond at first, her green eyes unwavering. She didn't blink once, Dawnstar almost thought she had been sculpted in place.

"Mom, *are you real?"*

"Yes." She responded this time, hastily. Her words were sharp, yet unnerving and quiet. Whoever this cat was, she held a type of

nefarious aura about her, one that made Dawnstar believe someone was toying around with her, however in the body of her mother.

However Swanflutter continued speaking, and though her apathetic tone was completely unfamiliar to Dawnstar, the words she spoke were sagacious and spoken with a type of wisdom only her mother adorned.

"When StarClan deems a cat too corrupt for their ranks, they believe they send them off into a void, where their soul no longer exists." Swanflutter began, the edge in her voice making Dawnstar's skin crawl.

"Some believe that they disintegrate into nonexistence, others believe they're doomed to an eternity of nothing but consciousness, as if they're trapped in a perpetual dream state," Swanflutter paused as she began to walk closer to her daughter, "however both of those theories are wrong."

Dawnstar just stared at her, the words getting completely tangled in her throat. Swanflutter must've noticed her daughter's confusion, so she continued speaking.

"A separate afterlife, Dawnstar." Swanflutter spoke, her tail wrapping around her paws steadily. "Just like StarClan, though this place is fueled by hatred because they were denied salvation."

Dawnstar continued to just stare at her, trying so hard to find remnants of the mother she remembered in the cat before her, though to no avail. She may *look* like her mother, but something about her was terrifyingly different.

"Mom," Dawnstar began shakily, trying to steady her own breathing as her blue gaze continued to burn into her mother's narrowed viridescent eyes, "*why are you here?"*

As the inquiry left her mouth, a smile slowly crossed her mother's face, though it was blood-curling. The apathy in her mother's gaze shifted into something entirely malevolent.

"Oh Dawnstar, it was a game and he played you good, but the thing

is, I played him."

"What are you talking about?" Dawnstar questioned, trying to piece it all together in her head.

"I had Tigertaunt wrapped around my claw since the moment I met him. His ego would always be his downfall, but I got his use before that ever happened." Swanflutter explained, a newfound power beginning to radiate off of her as she continued speaking. "You see Dawnstar, I fed you all these little philosophies your whole life, and you clung to them dearly. I made you believe I was an angel sent from above, but don't worry love, I had everyone fooled."

"What?" Dawnstar gasped under her breath, the confusion in her gaze shifting into something much more pained, a mere yearn for understanding.

"Everything I ever told you was a lie but yet, it was you who defended my words with such ferocity, and it was you who still managed to disappoint the mother you had grown to admire so much," Swanflutter paused once more as she stepped on one of the dead butterflies, "let me tell you this, *she doesn't exist.*"

"Mom you're scaring me," Dawnstar paused in a breathy panic, "I don't get what you're saying."

"She was a front; a facade I put on as I pretended to be the sweet, nurturing she-cat who was oblivious to the treachery of her mate— but don't get it twisted— your father's treachery is nothing but child's play to me. Your poor old dad was neglected by his parents and wanted so desperately to prove he could be something great that it tipped him over the edge." Swanflutter explained, a vile smirk crossing her face before she continued speaking, completely disregarding the betrayal which painted her daughter's face.

"Me however, I don't have a sob story. It was always a game to me, to see how much destruction I could cause. *It was thrilling.* The chaos I caused and no one ever would've believed it was me."

Wake up, Dawnstar. You have to wake up. This isn't real.

It can't be.

It was.

It was so incredibly real.

"You were the perfect candidate, Dawnstar, you always have been. A high achiever with extreme control issues? I always knew you would be grand, and with a father like you had, I knew exactly how it would play out," her words were growing more aggressive, through the next thing she said was much quieter, "you grew up with the intelligence of an adult and yet the emotions of a child."

"Despite this all, I'm still your mother and no one knows you better than me. I would watch the way you grew jealous of your father's approval over your brother and I always knew you craved that same validation. It's almost sad; you could have been extraordinary on your own, but your desperation ruined everything you ever had."

"You knew all along that dad's treatment was cruel, and you just," Dawnstar felt like she was going to burst into tears, "*did nothing?"*

"Oh don't worry, I think this helped you in the long run. Love only weakens you and now that you've singlehandedly ruined anything remotely good in your life, you have no one to impress so therefore nothing is holding you back."

Dawnstar couldn't believe what she was hearing, she didn't want to. Her whole life had been a lie and the cat who had made her feel the most safe turned out to be the most dangerous cat she had known.

Her own mother.

"If you want to feel bad for yourself, don't bother. Sure, your dad hurt you, he placed a wedge between you and your brother and you've lost those who you've loved. News flash, you're not special, and in the real world, the actions you made were the actions you consciously decided to pursue. There is no one to blame but yourself." Swanflutter explained, however she continued speaking before Dawnstar could even open her mouth.

"You've even managed to start an entire war between every clan, it's

ridiculous! *I've loved every moment of it."* Her mother lulled. "Watching you betray Bluegaze, someone you had grown to deeply care for, just to satisfy your dad. Honestly Dawnstar, you've grown to be quite the mastermind. I would be lying if I didn't say I was impressed you managed to get WinterClan on your side, but what can I say, *the apple doesn't fall far from the tree.*"

"Let's not forget Luca. You messed around and got pregnant with his kits, forced your friend to play daddy, killed Luca yet in the end the truth still got out. Remember when you forced your medicine cat to kill Blossomfall or else you'd murder her sister? Or being so destructively absent in your kits life during such a monumental time of their development? How about framing Hawkhowl for murders he didn't commit just to clear daddy's name."

"Enough!" Dawnstar screamed, her chest heaving as she felt tears begin to stream down her face and stain her fur. This reaction caused a sick smile to lace her mother's face, as if her daughter's pain offered her *joy.*

"You were the pawn to my game, my own personal toy of destruction, and you played your part brilliantly." Swanflutter spoke, nearly whispered.

"What does that even mean?" Dawnstar cried back, trying to compose herself, however every word that left her mother's mouth left her a little more broken.

"Before I was dead, I already had a hold on this place. I guess the cats which resided here thought I'd be an easy target; they couldn't have been more wrong. I was able to draw them in as well." Swanflutter explained as she began to circle her daughter, tail lashing slowly behind her. "Divine intervention, my love. You don't really think Tealpool's murder sprees were random? I had a role in that, and I made sure it was me who was his first victim. Poor Swanflutter, murdered in cold blood. Next was Flowerbee, and what a shame it was. She had her whole life ahead of her and she would have made quite the leader one day."

"*No*." Dawnstar breathed out.

"Then Doveflutter, I made him kill his own sister! *How genius is that?"*

As her mother brought up her dead mate, Dawnstar felt her tears come to an immediate stop, and the saddened look on her face turned into something much more enraged.

"I believe I hit a nerve. What a shame your mate had to die at the paws of her own brother who wasn't even himself. Unfortunate, and I take full pride knowing that it all stemmed from me." Swanflutter cooed and Dawnstar just wanted to claw the smug look off of her mother's face.

"The x markings were my idea as well, you know I'm a sucker for symbolism. Perceive it however you like; the x signifying the end of something, or the end of an entity. I liked the idea of it symbolizing this place as a whole new dimension of itself, one which promised transcendence to something predominant. So poetic, isn't it?"

Then it clicked. Dawnstar just looked at her mother with reddened eyes, remembering her previous dream and the whispers she heard but couldn't quite make out.

That was it.

Transcendence to something predominant.

That's what the whispers in her dream were chanting.

However now, Dawnstar just felt *empty*. She had never felt so lost in her life, and it was a feeling she wasn't sure she could live with. She wasn't even sure she wanted to live anymore.

At some point, it had all just became too much, too insufferable. It was constant, a feeling of hopelessness that hung above her head like a rain cloud.

As Dawnstar finally looked at her mother again, she had only one question for her.

"*Why*?"

Swanflutter just smiled.

"Because it was fun."

The words seemed to shatter any remaining stability within Dawnstar and she struggled to stay on her paws, her voice giving in and out every time she spoke.

"*Fun*?" She exhaled. "You destroyed so many lives."

"It's almost like that was the whole point. Like I said, it was a game and you played it perfectly." She explained, as if she had no care to the damage she had caused. "To put it simply Dawnstar, *some people just want to watch the world burn."*

"You're sick."

"And you're not?" Swanflutter hummed, almost too innocently. "I may have pointed you in the direction, but it was you who decided to follow the path."

"I-"

"Enough small talk though. You see, I want to see this war through and the only way that can happen is if you don't remember this conversation." Swanflutter interrupted, her face shifting into a faked smile, one that the mother she thought she knew would wear.

"But don't worry, you'll remember soon enough."

chapter 36

You're not special for winning a game
With someone who you know was never playing
She could've killed you
She had every right
You just caught her off guard tonight

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Delirium.

It was intoxicating, the promise of new bloodshed. The brink of war was breathing down their throats and soon, claws and teeth would mix in one of the bloodiest battles known to the clans.

Dawnstar was perched on a jutting rock which overlooked a steep fall, the view absolutely breathtaking. Rolling mountains covered in a thick blanket of snow, the sky a heavenly shade of pink which seemed to embrace FallClan's territory in a calm, protective shield.

It was surreal now.

As she padded home, her crystalline gaze seemed to take in every inch of her territory, still ashen and dead.

However an inexplainable feeling rose within her as her gaze fell onto— ironically enough— fire poppies. The first flowers which bloomed within her scarred lands, promising the hope for rebirth.

As Dawnstar stepped paw into her home, all eyes were set on her, though they weren't fueled by hatred. Instead, it was something much more determined.

A part of her was convinced that if she led her clan to victory, her sins would be erased and she could finally become herself.

Not the version her father wanted her to be.

But herself, all in all.

That night, she let sleep consume her, her dreams at bay. For once, she was given true rest to awake the next morning, the sound of gentle rainfall humming a comforting melody in her ears.

"The clouds seem much angrier in the distance." A somber voice lulled, that of Brinebloom. Dawnstar looked at the sky as he spoke, watching as the blackened clouds drifted closer to them.

"I think it's very telling." She spoke in return which elicited a questioning glance from her brother.

"We're in the calm of the storm," Dawnstar explained as she met his deeper blue depth, "metaphorically and literally."

"Very telling indeed." Brinebloom responded, though something flickered beneath his cerulean gaze, something that seemed almost guilty. Dawnstar stared at her brother for a brief moment before she looked back out to camp, watching as her warriors trained with Viperstar's in the gelid rain, sharing their clans' individual fighting techniques.

They were driven, she'd give them that much.

"Brinebloom."

"Yes?"

Dawnstar grew quiet once more, trying to piece together the words she wanted to say, though she knew she'd never truly be able to put it the way she wanted.

"I want you to know that I'll do better, I promise." She spoke, looking at him with a vulnerability she had *never* shown to her brother before. "After this war is over, I swear I will do everything in my power to fix what I've broken. You're my brother, and I know I don't tell you this enough but I love you, *more than you know."*

The look on her brother's face was something she had never seen before, a type of remorse Brinebloom had never exhibited.

"I love you too," he paused hesitantly, "*no matter what happens, okay?"*

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Maybe it was intuition.

But Dawnstar knew that by the storm's peak— the darkest hour as she liked to call it— it was to transpire. It was euphoric almost, a release she needed more than ever.

As nightfall settled and the rain poured in an aggressive frenzy, staining her pale fur to her skin, Dawnstar felt every inch of her body grow fueled with an exhilarated energy she had kept at bay for so long.

It all seemed to be slowed, the way cats came springing forth from the bare trees and crawling through cracks in her camp's borders, or the harrowing screams which echoed out into the endless sky. She felt as though she was under water, the yowls of war drowned out by her adrenaline.

Then suddenly, reality came crashing onto her mercilessly and Dawnstar let her gaze flicker to every direction, watching as the four clans dispersed into battle.

This was it.

She had one more shot at this.

"I've been looking forward to this." Cooed a voice Dawnstar had grown to loathe with such animosity, the hatred burning in her heart growing every single second as she glanced around to meet Creamlily.

"Trust me," she hissed, "*the feeling is mutual."*

Dawnstar was given only a second to think, but it was enough to allow her to instruct a plan. Over all the fights she had with the SpringClan warrior, she was able to analyze her strengths and weaknesses, something Dawnstar excelled in.
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As Creamlily made the first attack, the leader was able to dodge it, a satisfied grin crossing her face as she sent her claws against the warrior's shoulder, the warm sensation of ichor more than gratifying as it stained her white fur crimson.

However Creamlily didn't allow this to weaken her for long, and in Dawnstar's moment of triumph, the SpringClan molly had her claws sinking into her chest.

Though like Creamlily, she didn't allow the pain to falter her for too long as the two began to circle each other, both spitting blood.

This time, Dawnstar attacked first, quickly changing directions to confuse her opponent. Her attempt was successful, and with the upper paw, Dawnstar latched her teeth into Creamlily's neck, the tang of copper blood soaking her tongue and dripping from her mouth.

However soon Dawnstar was knocked off her paws, the wind instantly get forced out of her lungs as she stared up at Harvestleaf, his claws sinking into her shoulders as he kept her pinned.

"Not in control anymore, hm?" He whispered as he forced an innocent frown before falling into a nearly crazed laugh.

However out of the corner of her eye, Dawnstar noticed Leopardlune coming up behind him, relief instantly consuming her.

"*I wouldn't be so sure."* She snarled, kicking into his belly with her hindquarters, however before he could regain balance, Leopardlune was already prepared, her claws raking down his back.

As Creamlily recovered herself and prepared to attack Leopardlune, Dawnstar was already on her way, knocking her head into the warrior.

As Creamlily fell to the ground, Dawnstar didn't waste a single second as she held her on her side, claws tearing a complete rip through her ear. The agonizing scream which followed was more than rewarding.

"Dawnstar*!"*

A panicked voice yelled, and Dawnstar felt her entire body freeze as she glanced behind her shoulder to see Leopardlune pinned underneath Harvestleaf, his paw resting on her throat as she struggled to breathe.

Instantly, Dawnstar remembered back to when Creamlily had Doveflutter in the same position and her entire body was engulfed with a newfound rage.

"*Let her go."* Dawnstar snarled as she held Creamlily in the same position, her gaze burning into Harvestleaf's malicious laurel stare.

"Kill her Harvestleaf!" Creamlily croaked which resulted in Dawnstar pressing more weight on the warrior's throat; a silent threat.

However Harvestleaf didn't seem too threatened as he continued to place more weight on her friend's throat.

She watched with horror as Leopardlune's eyes began to turn bloodshot with hints of purple, leaving Dawnstar completely lost for thought as she placed her entire weight on the feline underneath her, the crack which followed enough to make her skin crawl.

Harvestleaf was left shocked, and in his momentary weakness, Leopardlune was able to break free, her body gasping for air however Dawnstar was too stunned to speak as she stared down at Creamlily, the warrior's eyes opened yet lifeless as blood pooled from her mouth.

"You did what you had to do." Leopardlune reassured breathlessly, though as Dawnstar looked at her friend, her gaze held a type of culpability, the same look Brinebloom had been giving her all day.

However she didn't have the time to question it.

As Dawnstar looked around, she was electrified. The way the rain cleansed the blood off of her fur was almost poetic, like a physical cleansing of her sins.

She watched as her brother had a SummerClan warrior pinned, the feline beneath him letting out a mercy cry which resulted in him

fleeing in defeat.

Then she glanced to Viperstar and Frostbird, the two able to old their own against three other warriors. She watched as their eyes gleamed in the pale moonlight, their gazes fueled by impulse.

Clearmist and Lionglare fought mercilessly against a few warriors trying to raid the medicine cat den, their spirits untainted and Dawnstar was consumed with a feverish rhapsody.

Lightning streaked across the ebony sky, followed by Earth-rattling thunder and rain which drenched her coat and rolled off her whiskers.

It was elating; vital even.

She had never felt so alive before.

However everything in Dawnstar froze as her eyes fell on Cranepaw fighting with Ivystar, the apprentice growing weak and strained with every new attack she sent her way.

Dawnstar immediately approached her niece and the SpringClan leader, tail lashing rashly behind her.

"You've reached an all new low Ivystar," Dawnstar hissed, "how about you pick on someone your own size?"

"I thought you'd never ask." Ivystar snarled in turn as she swatted Cranepaw a final time, sending the weakened she-cat straight to the rain-ridden ground as another howl of thunder erupted in the background.

She had been dreaming of this moment for moons, and now she would finally be allowed to put the brindled molly in her place and the feeling was nearly psychedelic.

As Ivystar's teeth pierced her ear, the pain was almost fulfilling. Dawnstar ripped her ear out from latched teeth, and half of her ear along with it.

As the pain soared through her body, a ripple of numbness followed

after, different pools of blood rolling down her face.

For a moment, the sight seemed to terrify Ivystar, however she didn't allow her shock to hinder her for long as she flung herself towards Dawnstar.

"Give it up, Ivystar!" She snarled as she dodged the attack, watching as her opponent's ears perked with another howl of thunder before falling short once again, her eyes falling into callous slits.

"Getting tired already?" Ivystar countered, the two both sending calculated blows as they continued to get drenched in one another's blood.

After awhile, the two were in a circling match, ears pinned and eyes formidable.

"You are such a plastered saint! You speak of my lack of honor yet it was you who ambushed my warriors and killed Cicadasong in cold blood." Ivystar snickered, her tail lashing with a pent up fury.

"Are you that delusional? Your warriors came into my territory and attacked me. Where you not aware? Do your warriors have so little respect for you that they have to go behind your back?" Dawnstar retorted back and the confusion which overtook Ivystar's face would've been amusing if the circumstances had been any different.

Ivystar really seemed as though this news was shocking to her.

"You know Ivystar, I spend so much energy hating you, but really, I just feel bad for you." Dawnstar spoke once more, a faked concern lacing her tone. "Your inability to lead is really quite obvious, *and really quite embarrassing."*

The confusion which once tainted Ivystar's brindled face bred into something much more angered, her teeth grinding in a malicious snarl as a streak of lightening flashed across the dark sky, and suddenly, ivory claws were raking across Dawnstar's drenched cheek.

The pain was immediate, rippling through her body as she stumbled back from impact, tail lashing in a renewed frustration as she glared

up at Ivystar, blood dripping from the wound. Dawnstar released a deafening yowl, claws extending to send her opponent a lethal blow, however Ivystar dodged it.

The two were now raised to their hind legs, slashing together in a bloody battle of purely heated claws, thunder sending the ground to mere vibrations as rain clouded both their vision.

However a sudden shift settled deep within her.

The world had seemingly gone quiet.

Everything except the cryptic disturbance of fluidic medium, a deafening crack which sent shivers down her back. Dawnstar began to back away, looking at Ivystar in horror, however the SpringClan leader seemed confused by her demeanor shift until her own ears perked at the groaning sound which was growing immensely louder.

"Ivystar," Dawnstar started shakily, "*get away from that tree."*

It really was cinematic, the way Ivystar's confusion bled out into pure horror as she slowly turned around to face a red wood tree which was swiftly crashing down.

The terror seemed to keep Ivystar glued in place and in the middle of the falling tree's damage path, leaving Dawnstar in a panic mode of her own, a real illustration of fight or flight.

However for a brief second, Dawnstar recalled back to her talk with Brinebloom, the memory vividly on replay in her mind.

"I want you to know that I'll do better, I promise." She spoke, looking at him with a vulnerability she had never shown to her brother before. "After this war is over, I swear I will do everything in my power to fix what I've broken."

If she wanted to hold truth in those words she held so close to her heart, she knew this was a fight she would have to accept, and with the size of the red wood, it wound surely strip Ivystar of her remaining lives in a slow, brutal relapse of death.

It seemed to be involuntary, the way Dawnstar instantly felt her paws skid across the muddy ground under paw, knocking her head into the SpringClan leader as they both went flying to the side, both now drenched in a multitude of rain, mud and blood as the tree came crashing down to the ground with an ear-splitting boom.

Dawnstar lifted her head, her vision going in and out until finally focusing once more, looking at the now fallen red wood, eyes widened in fear before she looked beside her to see Ivystar stumbling to her paws.

The two held each other in an inexplainable stare before it shifted into something much different. Dawnstar almost thought her eyes were deceiving her, but alas, the faintest smile laced her enemy's face.

"*Thank you."*

Ivystar spoke breathlessly, the sincerity lacing her face so foreign. Dawnstar couldn't even find the words to explain the new emotion which flooded her, but it was strong.

It was so incredibly strong.

And it was *good.*

However the moment soon vanished as the warmth in Ivystar's gaze transpired into something bewildering as she looked beyond Dawnstar's shoulder, and with her gaze Dawnstar turned around.

It was so fast.

The way the claws were piercing her throat, sinking deep and ripping out with such a forceful tear. Dawnstar felt her paws buckle beneath her before she fell to her side, the pain sending a throbbing sensation to rush throughout her entire body.

However her physical pain was numbed as she was met with a much more emotional injury.

Blue met blue in a look of pure betrayal as Dawnstar looked at her brother from where she lay on the ground.

He looked down to her, his left paw raised as her own blood dripped from *his claws.* The look he had been giving her all day was still tainting his face, though much more heightened now.

Suddenly the yowls came to a halt in an echoing fade as all the assembled clans began to surround her, some with confusion glued to their faces, others with a more knowing stare.

"I want to believe you, I do." Brinebloom started as his voice began to give out in a pained mew. "But some things just can't be forgiven, Dawnstar. *I can't let you keep hurting everyone."*

His words sent her into a full on panic attack. She could feel her body convulsing, however she wasn't sure if it was the pain which throbbed at her neck, or the flood of pain-stricken emotions which ruthlessly consumed her with lack of remorse.

She watched as Leopardlune joined her brother; the two cats she loved most, now looking down at her with a mixture of pity and apathy.

"*Mommy*!" Ivorykit screeched as she came skidding across the muddy ground, however she was soon restrained by Lionglare. Dawnstar watched as her daughter struggled against her deputy's hold, her eyes glossy as she screamed for her mother.

"Don't let her see this." Brinebloom muttered, his blue eyes casting Lionglare a warning glance. The deputy's gaze just briefly met Dawnstar's, almost as if he was trying to silently apologize, before he forced her screaming daughter away.

"We want to believe that you can change, *more than anything*, but some sins just can't be forgiven." Leopardlune explained, her voice shaky, continually going in and out as tears stained her cheeks. "And if I'm being truthful," she paused painfully, "*I'm scared of you."*

I'm scared of you.

The words settled deep within Dawnstar's core, the pain becoming all too much. She was dying, and without the comfort of her loved ones. Instead they looked at her with fear.

And yet the worst part was, *it was all her fault.*

She was her own enemy.

"I'm sorry." She whispered, the realization of it all causing her to completely break down. Her blood was screaming in her ears as shivers consumed her entire body. She had never felt so small. So fragile.

"I know you are." Leopardlune nodded, almost as if she was trying to convince herself she was okay, but the trembling of her own paws was enough to prove that she was far from it.

"If you had just waited, you could've seen it, you know? You could've seen the love I have to show. *I needed you to see it*, and now you never will." It was the only way she could put her feelings into words. Her pain into words. However words would never bring justice to the agony she was feeling now.

Or bring justice to the agony she inflicted on others. That was her true crime.

Maybe it was a gift to allow her to die like this. Their love may be strong, but their hatred for all she had done was stronger. She could let them hate her in her final moments, but it could never amount to how much she hated herself.

As her eyelids fluttered to a close, an instant memory relapsed from the very depth of her mind, sending a mental strike of horror to bleed into her drenched skin.

"You were the pawn to my game, my own personal toy of destruction, and you played your part brilliantly."

It was the very definition of a reality check, something Dawnstar so desperately needed. Swanflutter's words kept replaying in her mind, haunting her darkest thoughts.

All her life, she thought that the one who presented her the gift of life had also taught her the gift of love, but she now knew that wasn't true either. It was the family surrounding her now, however the truth still remained.

These cats taught her love, but she'd never get to share it with them. Not after all she had done. She'll die, merely being known as a villain to her clan.

The villain to her loved ones.

Her life was ending, however she wasn't even sure she had much left in her to begin with. Not now. Her soul was damaged beyond repair, so far broken that her own brother had to bring her down.

The world will go on, the sun will rise and fall and in it's wake, her home will be coated in the vermillion hue every dawn, reminding them everyday of this battle and the ichor which would stain it forever. But life would move on and Dawnstar would be left behind.

In her final moments of consciousness as her breath began to still, Dawnstar could hear her brother speaking, his words so faint she had to strain to even hear them.

"It's okay, little sister. You're safe now."

She didn't deserve his words of comfort, but she took them willingly. Dawnstar wasn't sure what was going to happen when she took her final breaths, or where she was going to go. But she knew she was no longer a pawn; a puppet.

Game over, Swanflutter.

Game over.

epilogue

Just close your eyes, the sun is going down
You'll be alright, no one can hurt you now
Come morning light, you and I'll be safe and sound

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"You know Leopardpaw is all talk, she's really just a big scaredy cat."

"I am not!"

"Fine, then prove it. Let's see who can climb the red wood first." Dawnpaw grinned, her tail lashing with excitement as her eyes beamed competitively.

"Oh please, you're going to eat my dust." Leopardpaw rolled her eyes, her copper gaze shining in the bright sunlight.

"Bark, if we're being technical." Lionpaw shrugged.

"Lionpaw, no one cares." Dovepaw groaned, resulting in a small laugh from Tealpaw and Nightpaw.

"Well, when one of you falls and breaks your neck, I won't be hauling your big rumps back home." Blossompaw deadpanned, a single ear flicking.

"Oh Bloss, stop being a buzzkill." Brinepaw retorted, however a small smile laced his face before all the apprentices turned back to the competitive duo.

"No please, I'd love to see Dawnpaw fall on her face." Dovepaw snickered, a smug grin tugging at her face however it appeared as though Dawnpaw was trying to ignore her.

"Okay okay, so the first to the top and back down wins. Sound simple enough?" Leopardpaw explained as she looked to her best friend.

"For me, however I'm not so sure about you." Dawnpaw bantered back, however her words were lighthearted as her whiskers twitched in amusement.

Leopardpaw just rolled her eyes playfully as the two began making their way to the start of the tree, each getting ready to take off as their friends gathered around them.

Nightpaw jumped to the nearest log as he tipped his chin, his fluffy sable tail curling around his paws as the others waited patiently.

"Welcome to the annual tree climbing competition! First we have Dawnpaw, the deputy's daughter, and Leopardpaw, the terrifying leopard!" Nightpaw boasted, looking all too pleased with himself.

"You're a horrible reporter." Blossompaw mewed, Tealpaw nudging the sable molly to silently hush her.

"Can we just get started already?" Dovepaw groaned.

"Whatever, okay," Nightpaw paused as a challenging glint beamed within his eyes, "go!"

Leopardpaw instantly kicked off her hindquarters as her claws latched onto the bark, her back legs hauling her up as she got to the first branch, not even batting Dawnpaw a single glance as she kept her eyes glued to the top.

It was a feeling of pure euphoria, the sound of rushing wind mixed with the laughter from her friends below as she glided through the tree, losing footing a few times but regaining it. Eventually she made it to the top just to be met with Dawnpaw, her friend's blue eyes shining brightly before they both were rushing to the ground.

Leopardpaw was growing messier with her movements, but as the ground grew nearer, she grew more excited. She completely missed the branch and ended up falling, however she caught herself.

Eventually she made it to the ground, nearly positive she had won, until Nightpaw's voice yelled in her ear.

"Tie!"

"What?" Dawnpaw and Leopardpaw both said in unison, looking at each other before looking back to Nightpaw.

"It was a tie." He shrugged.

"Leo definitely won." Dovepaw spoke matter-of-factly.

"You're just biased." Brinepaw snickered as he cuffed the calico over the head, Dovepaw shooting him an annoyed glare in return as she swatted his paw away.

"It's fine Leo," Dawnpaw purred as she nudged her friend, "we're both winners."

Leopardpaw glanced at the white molly beside her, a small grin crossing her face as she returned the friendly gesture.

"That's why we stick together." Leopardpaw lulled in turn, her golden gaze softening with Dawnpaw's crystalline depth.

The two fell into a shared laugh, enjoying the company of one another and completely drowning out the other apprentices.

It was them against the world.

"What are you thinking about?"

Leopardlune snapped out of her thoughts as a somber voice spoke gently in her ears, her dim copper eyes glancing up to meet her mate's azure stare in the pale moonlight.

"Just thinking back on a memory."

"Good or bad?" Brinebloom queried, a single ear flicking as he tilted his head.

Leopardlune laughed softly at his question which resulted in a curious look from the silver bengal.

"Good. Definitely good." She finally answered, her voice soft as she began to follow the path aimlessly, Brinebloom quickly matching her pace as they walked shoulder-to-shoulder.

It had been four moons since the battle, and four moons since the death of Dawnstar. Although FallClan was victorious, the following moon had been one of the hardest moons Leopardlune had ever experienced.

She and Brinebloom became distant from the clan, a constant feeling of guilt haunting them. However she knew Dawnstar's death impacted her mate more. She may have been apart of her friend's downfall, but it was his claws that sent the final blow and it was his claws that killed his sister.

Deep down, she knew it was for the best. No matter how much she wanted to believe Dawnstar could change, she just couldn't risk more lives on a single hope. It was selfish.

However with time, came healing.

The four clans had settled on pleading neutral with one another, finally putting the ongoing war to rest. Ivystar seemed to have a complete change of heart as she willingly surrendered Fishcape back to FallClan.

More so, the SpringClan leader even attended Dawnstar's vigil. It was a ceremony only members of the leader's clan could attend, but Lionstar had made an exception.

Speaking of her brother, Lionstar had stepped into leadership with ease and she was more than proud of him. He had proved everyone wrong and he did it all on his own while also repairing his relationship with Goldenfell once the chaos had subsided.

He ended up electing Frostbird as his deputy, which the entire clan seemed to approve of. She was headstrong, sure, but she was a wise warrior.

With her kits becoming warriors alongside the birth of Blossomfall's kits, FallClan seemed to prosper once more.

"Hiddenleaf has an eye on Mistykit," Brinebloom finally murmured after a long silence between them, "says he wants to save lives like her."

"That's precious." Leopardlune lulled in return, leaving the two with somber gazes and faint smiles. Her mate didn't respond. He didn't need to.

Leopardlune and Brinebloom had a natural connection; they always did. It took them awhile to realize it, but the two were paralleled; souls kindred. It was a beautiful thing, something Leopardlune had once been too shallow to fully understand until she matured. He was the best thing that had ever happened to her, and likewise.

Somehow the two had made it to Fishcape, the sound of soft trickling creek water singing a soft melody in their ears. It was a place of solace or "gentle resting" as Lionstar had called it once. He was such an old soul, she loved teasing her brother on his premature wisdom.

A core memory which burned so vividly in Leo's mind was her friend's dedication to this place. It consumed Dawnstar; quite literally engulfed her and rewired her to be so determined on keeping such a beautiful place, in which she was ultimately successful. That's why her vigil was held here. It's why her body was laid to rest here.

They owed her that much.

Leopardlune let her paws absentmindedly carry her to where the memorial was held, and where Dawnstar's body became one with the Earth. Ivorypaw had gone every few sunrises to replace the dahlias by her grave; a beautiful yet poisonous flower. Leo thought it was telling.

She could feel the warm breath of Brinebloom devour her whole as he sat beside her. The two sat in silence, looking at the grave of her dead friend. His dead sister.

The silence was full of sorrow, they could both feel the other's guilt. It almost became too painful until Brinebloom finally spoke, and yet it was words which replaced her guilt with something foreign.

"You know, it wasn't until the battle with those SpringClan warriors and Bluegaze was killed that I realized I had dodged a bullet. I

shouldn't have been so selfish, maybe then I could've protected her from our dad's abuse." His words were so quiet; so broken before he continued speaking. "By the time I killed him, he had already infected her mind. Deep down, I know she was good. I just wish I wouldn't have blamed her for all of it. I know her actions can only be explained and not excused, but it's tragic either way. *We deserved so much better*."

We. Not her. But we. Leopardlune looked to her mate, the fading moonlight casting an almost silvery illumination to reflect from his coat. She knew it was hard for him to admit that, he too, was abused by Tigertaunt. Brinebloom was probably the most emotionally reserved cat she knew. He didn't like to admit to his feelings, unless it was to her. She appreciated his trust in her, especially since it took them so long to establish it.

She appreciated his words, too. She knew Dawnstar wasn't inherently evil. *Evil.* She didn't like that word. Everyone had a story to tell in the whole tragedy of it all, and Dawnstar's was far from linear.

"I know, I just wish cats saw her the way we did, before any of this all happened. I wish they knew she wasn't born this way. She was a product of her environment and no one else but us cares to notice it." She responded, her copper eyes looking back down to the area where her deceased friend rested, noticing the way the grass began to grow back and the dahlias began to wilt.

"We knew her on a deeper level than the rest of them. How can you explain colors to someone who's blind, you know?"

How can you explain colors to someone who's blind.

She had never been able to explain her clan's unrivaled hatred for Dawnstar, but that was the perfect way of putting it. They didn't even know the half of it.

But she did.

Wildfire; destruction, hope, hell and purification. Each word seemed to define the now deceased leader in one way or another. It

was a wildfire which had once destroyed their home, a home which Dawnstar loved so dearly, and it was a perfect way she could fathom any kind of idealistic memory of her.

Dawnstar had destroyed them. She had given them hope. She quite literally put them through hell. And she was a beacon of purity, in more ways than one.

Soon the sun began to rise and Fishcape was set into a vermillion glow, the creek seemingly turning into a blood pool. It was beautiful, in a odd way.

Dawn was upon them.

The awakening of birth and rebirth; the coming of light. *Resurrection of souls.* It became clear, for once it was so vivid in her mind. Leopardlune would choose to connect Dawnstar to every morning which would exalt FallClan.

A depiction of yin and yang, yet not in a sense of good and evil and not in a sense of black and a white.

No.

It fell into the gray area; a sense of balance. Balance was a beautiful thing, a philosophy of interconnection and contrary all in one of the natural world. It all came back to Dawnstar. She was the true definition of dynamic.

She was everything all in one.

And that's how she would be remembered.

thank you.

I'm worse at what I do best
And for this gift I feel blessed
Our little group has always been
And always will until the end

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We did it.

There are so many things I want to say but words could never explain how relieved, excited, thankful and bittersweet I feel towards Grim Hollow finally coming to an end.

Dawnstar is a character I am so incredibly proud of, and to see how you all feel so differently about her is exactly the reaction I wanted to achieve.

The truth is, I would've *never* finished this fic if it wasn't for you guys. Your excitement for new chapters, your love for the characters and your overwhelming warmth and support has made it worthwhile. I've laughed at your jokes and cried with your own emotional responses to how this book made you feel. I've had people write paragraph-long messages explaining how they feel on certain events/characters and I genuinely cannot explain how happy those comments made me. We also made #1 on the warriorcats tag, and again, I am more than grateful. You guys are incredible.

Some of who have been here since I released the first couple chapters, and some of you are new, but I appreciate you all the same. You guys are like my little internet family and I will treasure the friendships I've made.

I've even noticed someone has created a wiki site for Grim Hollow and I literally could not stop smiling, it made me so happy, so from the very bottom of my heart, thank you!

Here's the link if you want to check it out: https://warriors-ocs.fandom.com/wiki/Grim_Hollow

I'm also curious, what did you think of Brinebloom? He seems to be the most polarizing character, some love him and others not so much.

To clear the air about Dawnstar, I will be allowing her fate to be up to you guys individually. Will she be accepted into StarClan, or will she be denied salvation and sent to rot at the lower end of consciousness like her mother? That is entirely up to you. If you like to think she becomes reincarnated to live a better life, or anything, it's up to your interpretation.

I'm also curious, what did you think of Brinebloom? He seems to be the most polarizing character, some love him and others not so much.

There's so much more I want to say but I will keep this short. Again, thank you. I couldn't have done this without you all.

It means more than you will ever know. <3